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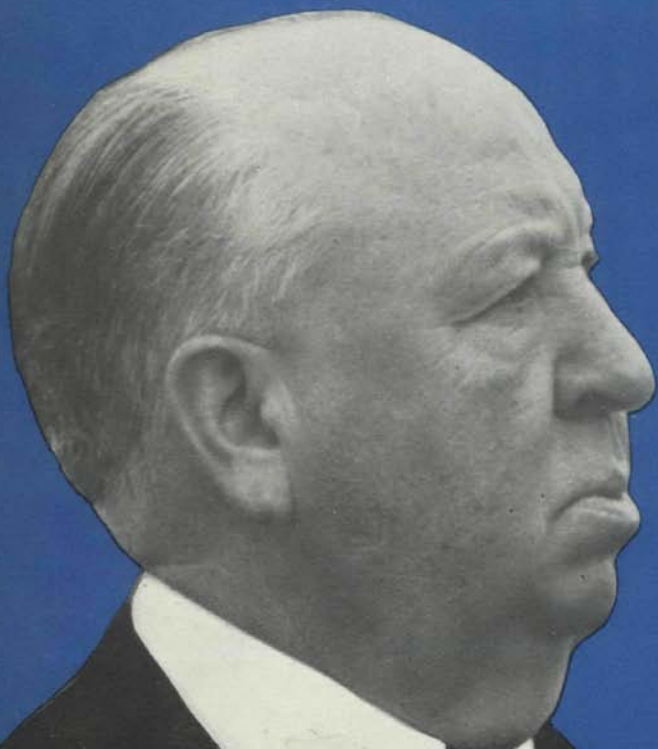
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories
presented by
the master

of **SUSPENSE**

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April 1975



Dear Reader:

I am delighted by your perspicacity in choosing this spring planting guide above all others. It lays to rest any notion you may have regarding phases of the moon or prognostication on flood and drought. Anytime is the right time. Just remember the rules: select tillable earth away from populous areas, sow as deeply as your back permits, burn your soiled clothing, and reap peace of mind—as well as, perhaps, Aunt Emma's assets.

Yet as someone once said, or should have, getting there is half the fun, and herein the groundwork has been done for you by such as Donald Olson, who sends down *Root of All Evil*, followed by a host of others, and capped by Stephen Wasylyk's grave novelette, *No Reason to Die*.

So for a time you may bury all thoughts of revenue officials and their seasonal impositions coming on top of rising costs of almost everything. Not one word further will be said about any of it.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 4, April 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions where \$10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. Copyright H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 1975. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

The root of all evil? There is good showing that it is not, after all, the love of money.



Now that I'm quite sure the house is being watched it might be wise to write it all down so there'll be some record in case anything happens to me. The Le Pard file contained the whole story, but of course I destroyed

that when I closed my office in Buffalo, abandoning my practice and my patients and giving "ill health" as the reason for my early retirement and resettlement here in Phoenix.

I first became involved in the dreadful affairs of the Le Pard family when Madeline came to my office one afternoon three years ago. She was then a modest, soft-spoken young woman of twenty-five who worked in a bookstore near Lafayette Square. I'd known her grandfather, old Alfred Le Pard, for many years, a somewhat eccentric character who had owned the Le Pard Herb and Essence Shop for over half a century, a business he had established before patent medicines and mysterious cure-alls crossed the corner from respectability to quackery, a far too antiquated business to attract a buyer, and when the old man died his wife gave up the Herb and Essence Shop and sold the fixtures, while continuing to live in the flat upstairs.

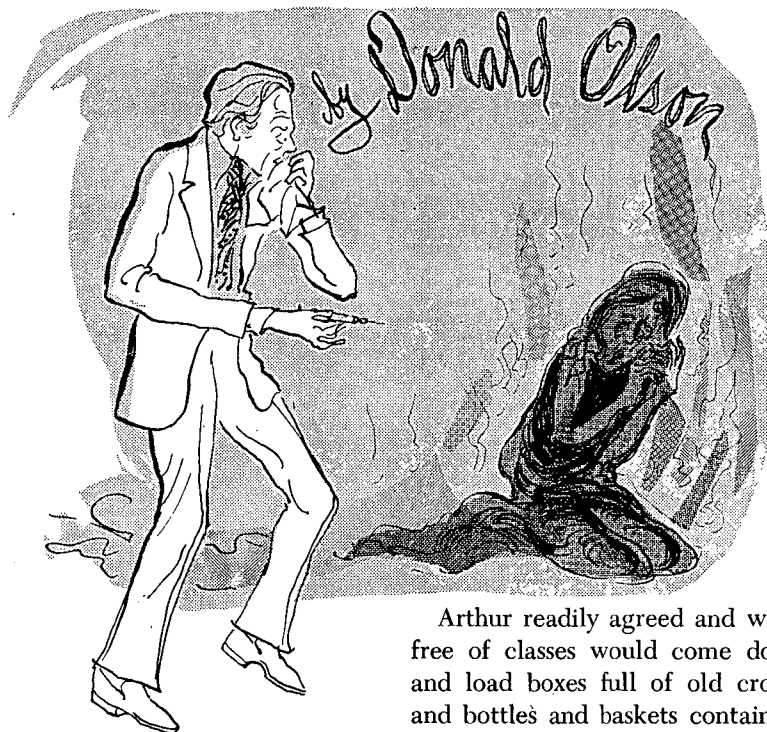
The purpose of Madeline's visit was not to consult me on her own

behalf but to implore me to go and see her grandmother.

"I thought she looked very well at the funeral," I said.

"It isn't Granddad's death," she explained. "It's what's happened since. Worry over Arthur."

would clear out the basement of the Herb and Essence Shop so that she could try to rent the premises to some other small business. She herself had a bad heart and couldn't climb stairs more often than necessary.



"Is he ill?" Arthur was her young brother, a sophomore at the university.

"I don't know. It's all so strange."

She told me that old Mrs. Le Pard had asked Arthur if he

Arthur readily agreed and when free of classes would come down and load boxes full of old crocks and bottles and baskets containing the remnants of those herbs and roots and strange smelly liquids and substances that had comprised Le Pard's stock-in-trade. Some of the crocks and baskets were of the types avidly sought by collectors and one of Arthur's classmates put him in touch with a man who had

such an interest. Arthur brought the man to the shop and let him rummage through the clutter.

"Then one day," said Madeline with a frown, "Arthur told Gram that he'd found a tenant for the store, a friend of the collector. His name was Morganti and he was some sort of lay preacher looking for a place to hold services." Mrs. Le Pard assumed he'd started one of those kinky fundamentalist sects, scores of which bloom and wither in the industrial towns of the North, and though fearing his tenancy might be brief considered a church the most eminently desirable of prospects and quickly accepted Morganti's offer of three months' rent in advance.

"As long as I can remember," Madeline continued, "my brother was never religiously inclined, but he got himself mixed up with these people. He helped them move in and set up their chapel. But when Gram wanted to go down and look at it he told her that disbelievers could not be admitted." In fact, they had gone so far as to change the locks and cover the windows with dark-blue curtains.

The night after they had moved in Mrs. Le Pard was nearly asleep when she heard a sound from downstairs. There was a thick mist that autumn night and when she

looked out she could see shadowy figures passing silently into the shop below. She looked at the clock: it was a few minutes before midnight. Needless to say, this was not a reassuring development, and she thought it odd that no sound issued from the premises below, no hortatory preacher's appeal, no voices raised in song or prayer, the silence as disquieting as those muffled figures.

The very next day she tried to contact Arthur at school, only to be told that he had not appeared at classes for several days. She got a cab and went to his rooming house near the Niagara River, a few blocks from the university.

His appearance stunned her. He was always a handsome boy but now he looked absolutely dazzling. There was, she told Madeline later, a sort of glow of exuberance about him—as well as another sort of glow. He was drunk. She had never known him to drink and when she would have remonstrated he became rude and impudent and bragged about having quit his studies. He wished only to learn about life, he said. He was tired of starving his senses and wasn't going to waste another minute on books and dreary lectures.

Mrs. Le Pard was heartbroken, accusing him of listening to the

wrong sort of friends and declaring her intention of evicting Morganti and his extraordinary congregation at once.

At first Arthur looked frightened, he gave a heavy sigh, but then he laughed in her face and said, "What a silly old bag you are!" He told her she would get them both in trouble if she tried to evict her tenants.

"Since Mother and Dad died," said Madeline, "Arthur and I haven't been close. We've gone our own ways and seen each other only at Gram's. Well, Gram called and asked me to come over. She told me all that I've just told you and she asked me to go with her that night when she evicted Morganti.

"Just before midnight we went downstairs. We were both nervous and I didn't blame Gram for wanting moral support. I knocked on the door. It opened a crack and I got a glimpse of the most evil-looking face I'd ever seen. Gram demanded to see Morganti. The door was shut. We waited. Finally, Morganti himself slipped out and before the door shut behind him a fetid odor escaped and filled our nostrils with an incredibly nasty stench."

Mrs. Le Pard stated her complaint and requested they vacate the premises within twelve hours.

Morganti, a fleshy, middle-aged blimp with a fawning smile and a manner altogether too womanish to suggest the faintest degree of menace, overwhelmed them with apologies, saying he'd never dreamed his "liturgical exercises" might have given offense. Then he leaned forward and whispered something into Mrs. Le Pard's ear. She looked startled and turned to Madeline and said, "Excuse me, dear. I must speak with this gentleman in private."

She stepped inside with him and shut the door, leaving Madeline on the stoop. It was a damp night and that faint, disgusting smell still hung in the air. Five minutes passed, then ten. She became alarmed and was about to open the door when Mrs. Le Pard came out.

"Oh, Doctor, I couldn't begin to describe how she looked. She was an old woman when she went into that place with Morganti. She came out looking ancient, half dead. Her face was ghastly and that horrible stench clung to her clothes. I started to put my hand on her arm and she shrank away from me. She said, 'Go away, Madeline. Now! Never come near this place again.'"

"Extraordinary," I remarked. "What did she mean?"

"I don't know. It's all she

would say. This morning I went to her but she refused to let me in. Oh, please, I've been out of my mind with worry. She always liked and trusted you. Please try to help her."

I promised that I would and as soon as my schedule permitted I drove across town to see Mrs. Le Pard, parking my car by the bridge and walking the block and a half to the old Herb and Essence Shop. I was on the other side of the street approaching the adjacent scrap of park when I happened to glance up at Mrs. Le Pard's window and saw the panes glowing like fire in the setting sun. The effect was indescribably weird, for at the same time one of the lace curtains was twitched aside and a face looked down at me, too far away and seen too briefly to be remembered later in detail: a man's face, I thought at the time, and I had an impression of swarthinness, of something malignant. Once more I assumed I was the victim of an illusion; the sunlight must have glimmered upon the old lady's face, giving it a look of crimson, bestial rage.

Still, thinking she might indeed have had a visitor and not wishing to intrude, I sat down on one of the benches in the little park and there I waited beneath a grimy sky across which sparrows flut-

tered with the urgency of flight from something more dreadful than the coming darkness. That section of the city with its shabby delicatessens, drab rooming houses, rummage parlors, and sordid bars was oddly desolate. My thoughts grew somber. The moon took shape like a sloppily poached egg in the dirty skillet of the sky.

By then some formless misgiving made me reluctant to enter that building and knock on the upper door. Feeling guilty, I hurried back to my car and drove home.

I felt even more guilty when Madeline phoned me a fortnight later, her voice taut with controlled hysteria.

"Please come," she begged. "Gram is dead."

She was waiting for me in the flat over the shop and after I'd made sure that Mrs. Le Pard was indeed dead she told me what had happened. She hadn't heard from her grandmother in several days and when she had gone there could not get in. At last, frantic, she had broken a pane in the door and forced her way in. She had found Mrs. Le Pard sprawled on the bedroom floor, her body naked and on her head a hideously grotesque bright red wig.

When the necessary calls had been made I stepped once more

into the old lady's bedroom, which reeked of something putrid, something already in an advanced state of decay, a curious odor, subtle and astringent, yet horribly pervasive. Looking more closely at the body I noted once more a minute ulcerous lesion above the elbow, which must have begun to fester while she was alive. The peculiar stench seemed to emanate from this lesion.

I heard a noise behind me. Madeline stood in the doorway, her face colorless. Unable to speak, she pointed at the atrocious wig. I reached down and dislodged it, Mrs. Le Pard's own dull gray hair reminding me of the woman she once had been. Madeline sobbed as we waited in silence for the undertaker.

Later, before she would let me drive her home, she insisted that Arthur must be told, and I think the shock of what she had already experienced blunted somewhat the surprise awaiting her when we'd climbed the three floors to her brother's room. Remembering what Madeline had said, I expected to find him defiant, cheeky, and obstinate. I was wrong. I had last seen Arthur at his grandfather's funeral, yet this young man might have been a stranger. He was thin, wasted, white-faced, and he received the news of his

grandmother's death with an air of bored indifference.

After letting us in and hearing why we had come, he walked back to his bed with a noticeable limp. Madeline asked him what was wrong. He casually lifted his right pant leg above the ankle, exposing a bandage around his leg. I could see that it was saturated with a yellowish dark fluid and seemed to give off a repellent odor.

"Let's have a peek at that," I said, but he drew back, a look of scorn darkening his pale features.

"Forget it, Doc. It's only an ulcer."

"Whatever it is, let me look at it."

"Believe me, there's nothing in that black bag of yours that could help this."

His manner as he said this was so bitterly forlorn it merely added to Madeline's depression, and I thought it best to get her away from there. Before leaving, I implored Arthur to call me if his leg didn't improve. He didn't answer.

Arthur did not show up at his grandmother's funeral and Madeline told me that when she went back to see him he would not let her in but spoke to her in the most sarcastic tone from behind the door, insisting that she leave him alone. Hurt and bewildered,

she had not gone back again, at least not for a month, when her conscience urged her to make one more attempt. This time he would neither unlock the door nor respond to her pleas, though she was sure she could hear labored breathing on the other side of the keyhole. She called me from a pay phone in the street and begged me to meet her there.

When my entreaties were likewise ignored I fetched the landlady and asked her to let us in. She said that she hadn't seen Arthur for several weeks but thought she had heard him going out sometimes in the middle of the night.

The moment the door was opened we were engulfed in a cloud of that same disgusting odor I had noticed on our earlier visit. Anxious as to what we might find, I tried to keep Madeline and the landlady from entering. The latter was more angry than curious.

"Here now," she muttered. "What's been goin' on in here? What a stink! He ain't been cookin' up here, has he?"

Cooking indeed. The odor was more like that of a dead and rotting animal, a smell of putrid organic waste. I felt sure something had died in this room and I dreaded what we might find when we turned on the light. I implored

the two women to wait downstairs. They refused, but agreed to remain outside the door until I had ascertained the source of that revolting odor.

I shut the door and switched on the light. The capacious room, with wainscoted walls and high ceiling, was furnished with a massive oak dresser, double bed, night stand, Larkin desk, and a tall double-doored oak wardrobe. The smell was overpowering and yet I saw no sign of Arthur Le Pard. Trembling, and with a belly fortified against shock by forty years of medical practice, I advanced to the wardrobe and gingerly pulled open the doors.

At once my nostrils were assailed by an odor so rankly offensive I had to turn away and hastily cover my face with a handkerchief, which did little good. On the floor of the wardrobe I spotted a heap of stained linen bandages; I moved a table lamp closer to get a better look.

The bandages were soaked with a yellowish-red exudate, and now, in the lamplight, I saw to my horror that this opaque, viscid, and foul-smelling liquescence dripped also from the walls of the wardrobe and lay in streaks and smears along the edge of the floor from the wardrobe to the windowsill. Great gobs of the substance clung

to the sill itself and only then did I realize the window was wide open. So potent and impenetrable was the stench not even the chill night air could enter the room. A fire escape led down from the window and I could see flecks of the noxious stuff coating the steps and rails of this device.

Now Madeline was calling to me in the most anxious tones, and I couldn't leave her in suspense any longer.

"Your brother's not here. He must have fled by the window and fire escape."

"Fled? From whom? From us?"

"From whom—or from what—I've no idea. There's nothing you can do here. Please go home and I'll try to follow him."

Eventually she was prevailed upon to leave, whereupon I got rid of the landlady also and then searched the room thoroughly, finding nothing for my efforts but more of the repulsive exudate. And, yes, one more thing: traces of a shredded black substance like some kind of granulated root, coarser and more pungent than garlic. I swept as much of this as I could into an envelope and then went down to the street. In the alley beneath the fire escape I found further traces of the vile exudate which I was able to follow all the way to the river, and

there, upon the very edge, it disappeared.

As a medical man I could draw but one conclusion: Arthur Le Pard had contracted some frightful disease, despaired of help or recovery and dragged himself to the river where he found in death an end to his suffering. I knew all too well that this was much too pat an explanation for these extraordinary incidents and I knew too that the circumstances should have been communicated to the police, but Madeline—and I could hardly blame her—requested me to say nothing. It was all too incomprehensible, too scandalous and shameful for her to wish it publicized.

I did not allude any more than was necessary to the curious substance I had followed, the nature of which blood-flecked matter puzzled me, for I could conceive of no bodily lesion capable of exuding any purulent matter in such copiousness, and if a man with my medical experience was so totally baffled one hated to think how such a story would sound to the police and to the press. Had I been a younger man, more spunky and resourceful, I might have pursued a different course, but there was that about the case that filled me with a curious repugnance and horror. I did nothing.

Nevertheless, as the weeks passed I thought more and more about Madeline Le Pard. Ashamed of not calling her, I would occasionally pass the old Herb and Essence Shop and never fail to note its air of desertion and those mysterious blue curtains still shrouding its lower windows. Then one night I caught a glimpse of a light in one of the upper windows. Curious, I called Madeline when I got home. There was no answer. The next day I stopped by the bookstore where she worked. The manager regarded me coolly when I asked for Madeline.

"She quit. Not so much as a day's notice. Just up and quit."

"Did she give a reason?"

"Said she had to dispose of her grandmother's estate. That it would take all her time." The woman frowned. "Madeline was always such a quiet, demure creature. Never sassy. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, indeed. A charming, sweet girl."

"Go and see her now. You may be surprised."

This sounded ominous and I lost no time in getting to her apartment, which I found occupied by a stranger who had no idea where Madeline had moved. Nor did the landlord. On a hunch, remembering that light above the Herb and

Essence Shop, I drove over there and climbed the stairs to the flat. Before I could even knock the door was flung open and Madeline waved me in.

Her appearance alone was a stunning shock: there was a radiance about her I'd never seen before, a bloom of health and high spirits which utterly transformed her. Yet I wasn't entirely pleased by this amazing air of vitality; there was a hectic, too voluptuous quality about it; I distrusted it, and for some inexplicable reason I was reminded of the incongruous red wig old Mrs. Le Pard was wearing on the day she died, the same element of wrongness.

"Well!" she greeted me boldly, brassily. "You crusty old sawbones! How come you've been neglecting me, huh? Found yourself a buxom little sweetheart, I'll wager. Confess! I won't be jealous. Life is supposed to be lived. Time you quit being such a dull old stick!"

Thunderstruck, I could only gape at her, unable to imagine what could have possessed her, and yet I couldn't deny that she had never looked more robustly healthy. I told her I'd been to the bookstore looking for her.

"Dullsville, you mean? I chucked it. Pictures and statues and books may be grand, but

they're not the life for which they stand.' Know who said that? Ten-nyson! And the old boy was right. It's high time I started *living* my life."

I was too pained and astonished to point out to her that her brother had adopted the same philosophy, and look what had happened to him. Besides, it would have done no good.

"And what brought all this about?" I asked her.

She gave me a saucy grin. "I was going to toss Morganti out of the shop, but he talked me out of it. Persuasive old butterball, he is. But wise. He's given me a whole new outlook on life. You ought to meet him. Come to one of our services."

"Then he's still here?"

"Of course."

Her manner was not encouraging. "I'll be running along. I just wanted to be sure you were all right."

"Never better, Doc. Come again soon." She gave me a shamelessly lecherous wink.

My eye chanced to fall on a shallow brass dish on the mantel shelf. It appeared to hold a dark substance similar to what I had scraped up in Arthur's room. "What's this?" I asked, stepping toward it.

She snatched the dish away

from me. "Just never you mind, Doc." Then she laughed uproariously. "You'll have to excuse me now. I've got things to do."

Her impertinence angered and offended me, and I vowed never to go near her again, even though I suspected there was something unnatural in her behavior.

Then, less than three months later, I received a note in the mail, written either in haste or in great perturbation, for the few words were nearly illegible. It said: "In God's name come at once. Madeline."

To my discredit, I did not immediately grab my bag and rush out, for though the note's appeal was unmistakably genuine, some irrational fear and innate distaste of the unsavory made me shudder as I handled it, and I thought I could detect a faint whiff of that same odor of corruption that had been so pronounced in Arthur's room. No, I didn't want to go, but I was still a doctor of medicine and a man of principle. I went to her.

When I got there I saw that the blue curtains no longer covered the lower door and windows, and peering inside before going upstairs I saw nothing but the outline of the old counter.

Upstairs, I found Madeline huddled under thick covers on the

bed. The room was filthy and as foul-smelling as Arthur's and to my disgust I could see that the underbedclothes were saturated, while globs of the mysterious exudate oozed from the linen and spilled in thick gouts upon the floor.

"Too late . . ." The words broke painfully from Madeline's throat. "The root . . . the root . . . destroy . . ." Tears rolled down her sunken cheeks and her eyes pleaded with me to go away. I told her I would get help, although I knew that to call an ambulance would be futile. No doctor of medicine, no specialist, no matter how skillful, could treat such an affliction as Madeline's.

I remembered a friend of mine whom I hadn't seen in many years. His name was Adrian Hendricks and he had been a great friend of my Uncle Philip's. I used to meet him at my uncle's and though we'd had some interesting discussions his preoccupation with the occult, necromancy, and diabolism began to bore me after a while—I had no patience with such nonsensical pursuits—and gradually I made a point of avoiding the man. Now, vague recollections of some of the things he used to talk about with so enthusiastic an air of authority came back to me. I decided to call

upon him and solicit his aid.

Hendricks was older, of course, and obviously something of a recluse, yet still radiating sincerity and good humor and immense intelligence, not the sort of intelligence that bullied or intimidated, for it was clothed in too warm and modest a nature for that; he was humble, Socratic, and engagingly boyish for a man of his years.

After going with me to see Madeline he told me bluntly that the case was hopeless. I refused to believe him, convinced by now that I had no choice but to admit her to the hospital.

"My dear boy," Hendricks insisted, "no X ray will detect Madeline's trouble, nor any medical test. It's not a virus or bacillus. It's a force of energy gone amok."

"Don't sell me that rubbish, Adrian."

"Then call it poison."

"That's more like it." And I told him about the rootlike substance I had found in Arthur's room, and in the flat. He demanded to see it, and he examined it with excited delight.

"*Le poudre diable*," he murmured.

"What?"

"Poison, but not the sort of poison you're thinking about."

"Then you know what it is."

"I've read about it," he answered vaguely.

"Then isn't it time we called the police? If some maniac is running around poisoning people—Mrs. Le Pard, Arthur, now Madeline—"

"No, no. We're talking about something that poisons the soul—and corrupts the body."

"Be more specific."

He regarded me thoughtfully. "Someone once said that to desire consumes us and to have our desires fulfilled destroys us, but that to *know* is to be steeped in perpetual bliss. He was wrong. Certain kinds of knowledge can be as harmful as the deadliest poison."

"But you must tell me," I demanded. "I can't help her unless I know."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "I've told you. She is beyond help."

"No!" The man's fatalistic calm infuriated me.

"Pray for her soul, if you wish. You can't save her body."

I spoke coldly. "Very well, Adrian. I'm sorry I bothered you about this. I won't do it again. But if she must suffer the same kind of horrors that her brother did, at least she isn't going to suffer them alone in some stinking room."

He shook his head. "You've no idea, no remotest conception, of what you would be exposing yourself to."

"Then I'll find out."

"It could destroy you."

"So could a guilty conscience."

He sighed. "What do you intend to do?"

"Take her home with me."

He looked at me steadily for several moments as if gauging the depth of my resolve, and then once more he sighed and said, "Very well. We'll see it through together."

As a doctor I was used to observing the pathogenesis of disease, yet this was a new experience, for about this case there hung an aura of corruption, of a pervasive evil communicated to the senses most vividly by that increasingly loathsome stench, which no fumigating agent was potent enough to kill and which assailed the brain as maddeningly as would some incessant shrill sound from which one couldn't escape.

How long, I wondered, could a person with humane instincts bear witness to such mortal agony, as Madeline was suffering behind that closed door at the top of the stairs, for at times, especially in the dead of night, her cries of pain were beyond endurance.

I beseeched Adrian to tell me at least what it all meant, but he willfully misconstrued my question.

"It means there must soon be an end to her torture. But not soon enough, I fear. It's vitally important from now on that you not enter that room again."

"But I must."

"To administer morphine? Surely you've realized, my boy, that even morphine is now powerless to soothe her pain." He seemed to debate whether to go on. "Besides, in a very short while there will be no access to the bloodstream—for any sort of injection."

I didn't at first catch his meaning, or pretended I did not.

"You must think about it," he added gently. "If ever a mercy killing was justified—"

"No! Never that. Never that."

Cold as it was, neither of us could remain inside the house for more than short periods at a time, and one day at dusk, as we were walking together in the garden under the feverish red glow of the darkening sky, I happened to glance up at Madeline's window just as the shade suddenly moved, as if something had leaned clumsily against it. A moment or two later something took shape between shade and window, some-

thing dark and formless as an animal's paw, and this *thing*, whatever it was, began to thrust itself again and again upon the window-pane until the glass broke, and from this torn and ragged *thing* a dark and viscid substance dribbled down the brick wall and fell in thick gout upon the withering rhododendron leaves.

As I started to rush into the house Adrian's hand fastened upon my arm.

"Let me go!" I cried. "There's something in there with Madeline!"

"Calm yourself. There's nothing in there. I swear it."

By sheer force of will he managed to keep me from going to her, or perhaps I didn't really want to go into that room up there, no matter how loudly my conscience screamed, and yet it was a critical moment, a moment when a certain firm resolve became fixed in my mind, for it was the mystery, you see, that tormented me as much as my own helplessness in the face of it, and when Adrian came downstairs, his feet heavy with fatigue, I was waiting for him in the study.

I poured him a double Scotch and one for myself, setting mine untasted on the desk in front of me. "I think it's time we talked about all this, Adrian. I mean

really talked about it. It's not entirely new to you, is it? I think I've only just realized that."

He shook his head. "I've heard of it, yes. I never expected to come this close to it. There was the case of a man in an asylum in Geneva, Switzerland in the 1880's. They called it a form of hysterical leprosy, if you can imagine such a diagnosis. There have been other cases. One in London in 1911 even involved children. Of course, none of the medical records even hinted at the truth. But there is no point in talking about it. Don't you think it is time to act?"

"To act?"

"To end it."

"No!"

"While consciousness persists the agony is frightful."

"It would be murder," I said.

"It would be mercy."

My drink still sat untasted before me, and now my hand rested upon the top drawer of the desk. Adrian looked at me with sad-faced disapproval. "While you wait for miracles, that girl suffers the tortures of the damned," he said.

"No, Adrian. I'm not that heartless." I opened the drawer and took out the envelope of shredded roots I'd collected in Arthur's room, and as I talked I casually dissolved some of the granules in

my glass of Scotch. "But you can't expect me to participate in a mercy killing without knowing all the facts. It's time you confided in me."

He stared fixedly at the glass. "What did you put in there?"

"I forget what you called it. The thing that poisons the soul—"

"My God!" He leaped from his chair. "Are you insane, man?"

I smiled calmly as I continued to stir the drink. "There was a time, Adrian, when I scoffed at all this gibberish you've been hinting at. But recently I've seen too much that I can't rationally explain. I think I can believe almost anything now. I can believe this stuff is responsible for Madeline's condition. And Arthur's. And probably Mrs. Le Pard's." I lifted the glass to my lips. "I'm going to swallow it, Adrian. I swear it. Unless you tell me at once what all this means."

If he looked tired before, as well as sick and old, this brash ultimatum of mine seemed to undermine the very core of his morale, and yet for all his noble scruples it must have been a relief to the man to be forced to share his awful knowledge.

He began by placing a forefinger upon an area of his skull. "There's a part of the brain called the *globus pallidus* situated within

that complex of the basal ganglia which is the reputed source of all instinctual energy, and the whole region is still *terra incognita*. Now, if some exogenous chemical were to generate within that complex a store of instinctual energy so massive and uncontrolled the ego could not tolerate it without some drastic alteration of the body's chemistry, do you know what would happen?"

I waved my hand in protest. "I'm not even sure what you're talking about. But you're saying this stuff is such a chemical?"

"I am. And I'll tell you what would happen. First there would be a ripening and expanding of all bodily and mental processes, a keening of the senses accompanied by intense euphoria and an insatiable erotic appetite, culminating in a sort of perfection of fulfillment—a perfection purchased at a monstrous and terrible cost, for afterwards comes the decline, the quick festering decay, the suppurating rot into nonexistence. Unless of course the constitution proved too weak to stand the enormous stress to which it would have been subjected, which was the case, of course, with Mrs. Le Pard. The heart seizure that killed her saved her from unspeakable agonies and degradation."

As I listened to all this I felt

the sweat pricking my skin and my hands grow cold and my heart beat with a strangled rhythm.

"Modern pharmacology," he went on, "has produced wonders undreamed of even a generation ago, yet the science is as old as mankind. Drugs that affect the mind and alter the body's chemistry have been known and used for centuries, and there is one, the very one you've stirred so recklessly into your drink, which is more potent and terrible than any hallucinogenic agent of today. It's had many names, *le poudre diable*, *vinus diabolicus*, Black Wine."

"But why has all this happened here?"

"The Herb and Essence Shop, you must remember, had been here for decades. Innocently or not, old Le Pard was a practitioner of that ancient art on which the modern science of pharmacology has built its empire . . . oh, they knew where to look for what they needed."

"They?"

"The creatures whose depraved souls enjoy the most exquisite pleasure from the corruption of innocence. Evil is more than a word. It writhes and billows and foams about us, an impurity as subtle as the air itself. A cult has existed for as long as the substance itself has been known. Men

like Morganti roam the earth like vampires, a brotherhood of the damned, battenning upon the innocent, tempting them with promises of sensual and spiritual bliss, but concealing from them the terrible price they must pay for such ecstasy."

Unspeakable fantasies troubled my mind as I listened as if hypnotized, like a child who listens to a ghost story told with such conviction it overwhelms the defenses of reason and stirs to life utter belief in the unbelievable.

"And now," he concluded, "it's for you to decide what's to be done."

I gave him the answer he had been waiting days for me to give.

He nodded gravely. "Then let it be done at once. Give me your hypodermic needle."

"No," I said. "If it's to be done I'll do it myself."

"Don't be a fool. You're ready to break as it is."

"Then let's not waste time."

"You haven't seen her for days. You've no idea."

Turning my back on his arguments I went to my room, placed the syringe upon the Bible and fell to my knees and begged God's forgiveness for what I was about to do, then without delay I walked resolutely down the hall to Madeline's room.

As I opened the door a blast of unbearably foul air stung my nostrils and at the same time, like a mournful, uncanny greeting, a bubbling sigh or moan rose eerily and faded away, leaving in its wake a low continual hissing or sputtering noise, although I could see nothing in the room but streaks and puddles of that same hideous exudate which had been so conspicuous in Arthur's room. I looked around with creeping dread, seeking the living source of that vile liquid corruption, and I realized the ghastly sounds were coming from the closet.

Clutching the hypodermic tightly in my hand, I advanced to the open door and peered inside.

In the farthest, darkest corner of that closet all the visually imaginable horrors of this world were gathered together in one harrowing spectacle. A roaring filled my ears and clouds spread mercifully across my brain, dulling the impact of that dreadful vision.

Formless and featureless, the thing that had been Madeline Le Pard crouched seething and suppurating in the corner of the closet, her festering flesh oozing into slime before my eyes.

I dropped the needle and stumbled from the room, unaware of the pain as I slammed blindly against the door frame in my

haste to reach the staircase.

Adrian caught me in his arms.

"Is it done?" he cried.

"No! Oh, God, no!"

He held me while I was sick and then he guided me into the study and after settling me into a chair he moved staunchly to the fireplace and picked up the brass poker. I made no move to stop him as he walked from the room. I heard him climb the stairs and I heard, as from a distance, the dying cries of the thing in the closet.

Presently he came downstairs and into the study. He was paler than death and seemed to have aged ten years in those few minutes.

"It's done," he murmured.

"Thank God."

"I'm going out now. I'll buy enough lime to destroy what's left up there."

I went with him, unable to bear the thought of being alone in the house.

The city was intolerable to me after that. Needing a long rest and a complete change of scene, I moved here to Phoenix, settling

myself in a small house at the edge of the desert. I still have with me samples of that shredded black root picked up in Arthur's room and in the flat over the old Herb and Essence Shop, for there was enough of the scientist left in me to believe that some day, when the horrors of the past have been sufficiently dimmed, I might wish to have the substance professionally analyzed. Though now I'm not so sure.

A man who came out to look at some old medical books I advertised for sale happened to see the bottle behind the locked door of my cabinet. He seemed inordinately curious about it, and there was a fiery sort of gleam in his dark eyes as we said good-bye.

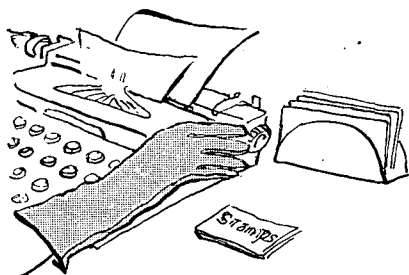
I gave it little thought at the time but late last night, when I happened to look out, I could have sworn I saw him standing on the corner under the street light, watching the house. He was gone this morning, but I've had the strangest feeling all day that someone was following me, and watching me . . . and waiting.



One really needs an inside track if he wishes to curtail progress.

To the Barricades!

by
Jack Ritchie



I reread the news item. It seemed that a construction worker, one Mike Higgins, had fallen off the top of one of the huge pillars being erected to support the new North-South freeway and had fatally broken his neck. There had been no witnesses to the accident, Higgins having evidently lingered on the job after his co-workers had departed for the day.

I put on my rubber gloves and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter.

Mayor Swenson:

I can no longer allow you and your kind to displace families and uproot established neighborhoods in the name of freeway construction and dubious progress.

Peaceful protests by the citizenry and meetings with officialdom have proved fruitless in the past. The time has come for direct action.

Therefore I hereby take matters into my own hands and declare war on all those individuals who are engaged in any capacity whatsoever in work connected with the construction of these abominations.

As a beginning, I would like to bring to your attention the demise of one Mike Higgins, who "fell" from a pillar at the construction site of the North-South freeway yesterday.

He did not fall.

I pushed him. He is the first, and there will be others.

Concerned Citizen and Defender of Established Neighborhoods

I addressed an envelope, applied a stamp, and went out to mail the letter.

I had not, of course, pushed Higgins off the pillar.

However, it was now my intention to *appear* to have committed the "murder" and a number of others that seemed sure to follow.

There are literally thousands of people connected with the construction of a freeway; and during the course of the year or so required to complete the North-South freeway, some of them were bound to expire, on the job or off, naturally or accidentally. It was a matter of simple actuarial statistics. So, whenever the circumstances surrounding one of these deaths was the least bit cloudy, I would step into the breach to claim credit for yet another murder.

Mine is a neighborhood of small shops and restaurants interspersed

among single-family houses, duplexes, and rather aged three-story apartment buildings. None of our history has as yet been buried under a supermarket parking lot—or a freeway, for that matter. Families here have the habit of remaining for generation after generation, often in the same house. In short, we are a comfortable small town within a large city.

At seven the next evening, Waldo McCarthy, carrying his chess set, knocked at my apartment door.

Waldo is my cousin. He is also a lieutenant in the Detective Division of our police department, and he lives just down the hall.

I put a bowl of stick pretzels beside the chessboard and sat down. "How are things at headquarters?"

Waldo shrugged. "Same as always, Albert."

"Murders? Rapes? Bomb threats? I suppose even anonymous letters?"

Waldo opened with P-K4. "Speaking of letters, the mayor did send over two threatening letters he got this morning."

"Two?"

"There was this woman who threatened to throw a pie at the mayor's face if he didn't get the sidewalk in front of her house repaired. We talked it over with

her. She had the pie all right, but we talked her out of throwing it. It was delicious."

I moved my black to P-K4 and waited. Finally I said, "You mentioned *two* letters."

"Oh, yes. Some nut wrote that he murdered a construction worker because he wanted to stop the North-South freeway construction. We're looking into it, of course. Part of our job."

I had bristled slightly at the word "nut." "I don't imagine the letter was signed?"

"No. Though you'd be surprised how often an idiot like that will actually do it."

Idiot? I bit severely into a pretzel stick. "I suppose you tested for fingerprints?"

"Yes. There weren't any."

"Devilishly clever of the writer."

"Maybe. But as it is, we know a few things about him anyway."

"How could that be possible?"

"For one thing, I don't believe he's really concerned with the North-South freeway at all. If he is, he's too late to do anything about preserving the neighborhood anyway. All the land needed for the freeway has already been bought up and the buildings razed. So I think that he's really worried about the East-West freeway, which is still in the talk

stage, but evidently it's planned to plow through his neighborhood and he doesn't like that at all. So he really intends to scare people off freeways in general, especially before the East-West freeway gets off the ground, so to speak. And, of course, the writer is a man."

"How do you arrive at that?"

"Even in these days I hardly think that a woman would climb up a highway pillar to push somebody off."

I watched Waldo move N-KB3. "So that narrows it down to men living in old established neighborhoods in the path of the East-West freeway? That's hardly pinpointing it."

"Also he's over fifty and a little pompous."

"Pompous?"

"We arrive at that from the general tone of the letter. He uses words like 'demise,' for instance. 'Citizenry,' and 'officialdom.'"

I moved N-QB3. "Very well. So the police are looking for a man over fifty, possibly just a *touch* pompous, who lives in an old established neighborhood in the path of the proposed East-West freeway. There are a lot of old established neighborhoods in the path of the East-West freeway."

"Really fewer than you'd think. Actually he could come from anywhere around here."

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. I had been eating quite a few pretzels.

The next day's *Evening Standard* carried more news about the defunct Higgins.

The police, acting on an anonymous tip passed on to them by the mayor, had questioned Higgins' fellow workers and arrested a Frederick McNeil, 52, employed by the Van Dine Construction Company. McNeil had confessed to pushing Higgins off the pillar in a dispute over a loan. McNeil lived approximately three blocks from my apartment.

I felt a bit relieved by the turn of events in this particular case, however there still remained the problem of the freeway and I felt committed to stopping its construction. Call it my mission, if you will.

A week passed, during which I searched the *Evening Standard* each day until I found another item of interest. An Edward Minelli, 34, had gone off alone to fish in Lake Nagawicki. At the end of the day his boat had been found overturned and his body had been recovered in fourteen feet of water. He had been employed as a truck driver by the Hennessey Asphalt Company.

Hennessey Asphalt? Wasn't Hennessey Asphalt one of the sub-

contractors for the freeway construction? Of course. I had seen their trucks at the North-South construction site a number of times.

I put on my rubber gloves and slipped paper into the typewriter.
Dear Mayor Swenson:

Us working stiffs are getting sick and tired of City Hall pushing us around all the time, like ruining our neighborhoods by tearing them down, many of which houses is still livable and in good condition, and evicting us with no place to go.

You Eggheads think you can run everybody's life and build them freeways for which we got no use, not to mention the expense. When Law and Order break down, then it's up to patriotic citizens to do something about it, which I am.

I just pushed Ed Minelli of Hennessey Asphalt, which works on the freeway, out of his boat and he drowned. You'll find the story about him drowning on the same page of the paper which contains the cartoon "Adventures of Rick Ravine," whom I am also a fan of.

And the same will happen to anybody else what works for the Freeway Crowd.

*Sincerely,
Hard Hat*

I felt rather proud of the letter.

On Friday, Waldo showed up again with his chess set.

After the third move of our first game, I said, "Getting any more anonymous threatening letters?"

Waldo nodded. "The mayor got one from somebody who signed himself Hard Hat. Says he wants to stop freeway construction and is going to do it by murdering people."

"Ah," I said. "And were you able to deduce anything about the writer from the letter?"

"Well, for one thing, he reads or subscribes to the *Evening Standard*."

"How do you come to that conclusion?"

"He mentioned that the story of Ed Minelli's drowning appeared on the same page as 'Adventures of Rick Ravine.'"

"Ha," I said, "I happen to know that *both* of our evening papers carry the 'Adventures of Rick Ravine.'"

"Yes, but only the *Evening Standard* carried Minelli's drowning on the same page. Also, the writer is not a hard hat."

"Why not?" I demanded rather sharply.

"It's not logical. Hard hats are always in *favor* of construction, no matter what it is or where it's going to be. Besides, I doubt very

much if Hard Hat could type a letter of that length without making at least one typing error." Waldo shook his head. "No, Albert. The same person who wrote the first letter about Higgins also wrote the letter signed Hard Hat."

"How could you possibly come to such an idiotic conclusion? I imagine the literary *styles* of the letters must be poles apart."

"Yes. But both letters were written on the same typewriter."

"Oh," I said.

Waldo moved B-R4. "So the letter writer is a man over fifty who lives in an old established neighborhood in the path of the proposed East-West freeway, can type well, reads the *Evening Standard*, and is pompous."

Why did he dwell on pompous? Formal would have been a more accurate word. Or reserved. Something like that.

In Sunday's *Post Dispatch*—which I had decided to subscribe to—I read that the state police, spurred on by a tip forwarded to them from our mayor, had conducted a further investigation into the death of Ed Minelli. They dug up the fact that Minelli had last been seen in his boat with another man earlier on the afternoon of his death.

Scuba divers searching the area

of the drowning for another possible body, did not find one. However they did recover two fishing-tackle boxes, each of which carried an identity plate. One of the boxes belonged to Ed Minelli; the other to a Fred Nettleman, of Reedsville, a small town adjoining Lake Nagawicki.

The police found Fred Nettleman at home and very much alive. Further questioning brought forth the information that Nettleman had met Minelli in a lake-shore tavern on the afternoon of Minelli's death. After they downed a half dozen beers, they decided to go fishing together. They spent two hours on the lake, during which time they caught no fish, but did consume a case of beer. They quarreled over something which Nettleman did not now remember, and scuffled. The boat overturned.

Nettleman swam to shore, drove home, and promptly went to sleep. When he awakened and learned that Minelli, a nonswimmer, had drowned, he panicked and decided to remain quiet about the whole affair.

The next morning, as I left for work, I met Mrs. Pender in the hall. She is in her eighties, a widow, and has the apartment adjoining mine.

"Isn't it just terrible what hap-

pened to Mr. Wilson?" she said.

"Wilson?"

"Yes. Top floor back, you know. Last night he was struck by a hit-and-run car and killed."

Wilson? Wilson? Oh, yes. I remembered him vaguely. A small man. A bachelor. Kept to himself. We'd never communicated with more than a nod in passing. I had put him down as a bookkeeper or clerk.

"He was a bookkeeper," I said, "wasn't he?"

"Yes. With the Burley Sand and Gravel Company."

Burley Sand and Gravel? Any company with a name like that *must* have something to do with freeway construction. Had I actually been harboring one of those freeway construction freaks in my own apartment building?

I went back to my apartment for my rubber gloves and stuffed them into my pocket.

During lunch period at the company, I remained behind and locked the door of my office.

I slipped on my rubber gloves, selected a sheet of paper, and began typing.

Your Honor, Mister Mayor:

Our high school class project this year is Ecology and we will all try to preserve our environment, each in his own way.

Mine is opposing the freeways,

which to my mind, you know, is anti-environmental. And it is up to us of the younger NOW Generation who are unafraid to half the sins of our fathers which are covering the landscape and disturbing the Balance of Nature and the Chain of Life.

As of this moment, I am dedicating my entire life and efforts, you know, to stopping freeway construction, which, if nothing else, you know, is the personification of faceless dehumanizing technology which seeks to turn all of us into faceless punch cards for computers.

Therefor earlier today, I borrowed Dad's car, and ran down James Wilson, who is associated, you know, with the Burley Sand and Gravel Company, which is affiliated through insidious means to the vested interests of freeway construction.

I am pledged to kill people—even though it makes me nauseous—who have sold themselves, you know, in any capacity whatsoever to the enemies of Ecology. Let there be no more Silent Springs.

*Yours truly
The Good Seed*

I reread the letter, verifying that I had made a number of intentional typing errors, and then sealed and mailed the letter.

When I arrived home late that afternoon, I read the account of Wilson's hit-and-run death in the *Post Dispatch*.

On the same page, I also found an item concerning a Ms. Bertha Thompson, 46, who had been found dead behind the wheel of her car in her own garage. The ignition key of her automobile was still turned on and the gas tank empty. She had last been seen leaving a party at the home of a friend. She had appeared to be in good spirits.

Probably she'd had a bit too much to drink, I thought. She had gotten safely to her garage, allowed the automatic door to close behind her, and then closed her eyes for just a moment, and gone to sleep with the motor of her car still running.

I read farther. An autopsy was scheduled. Ms. Thompson had worked as a private secretary to the president of Lakeside Hardware.

Lakeside Hardware? Wasn't Lakeside that gigantic four-story, block-long building down on Lincoln Avenue? Of course—and wasn't it one of the largest manufacturers of hardware in the Midwest?

Then surely it must have supplied some sort of hardware used in the construction of the North-

South freeway. It had to have.

I rubbed my jaw. Should the phantom letter writer strike again? And so soon?

It was perhaps pressing things a bit but, on the other hand, I might not find such an ideal unintended death in the newspapers again for some time.

I put on my rubber gloves and slipped paper into the typewriter. I wouldn't mail anything I typed on this particular machine again, of course, but at least I could rough out a draft. Tomorrow I would retype the letter on one of the office machines.

I hesitated a moment. Another letter from the high school student? No. Two murders in one day were a bit too much for a teen-ager.

Perhaps I should try the shotgun approach? A great many letters from a variety of people? Something was bound to kindle somewhere, wasn't it?

I was still typing when the knock came on my door. I glanced at my watch. Oh, yes. That would be Waldo.

I put the cover over the typewriter, removed my gloves, and stuffed them into a drawer before going to the door.

It wasn't until we started our second game, that I brought up the subject of letters again.

"How's the anonymous letter business?"

"Quite good," Waldo said. "We have another letter—came in late today. Same theme. This time the writer represents himself as a high school student."

"Really?"

Waldo nodded. "He claims to have killed someone who lived in this very building."

"My goodness," I said.

"The writer claims that he ran down James Wilson with his car."

I frowned. "Wilson? Wilson?" I shrugged. "Quiet chap. Kept to himself a lot. Worked for Burley Sand and Gravel. So the writer of the letter killed him?"

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"We've already booked the man who ran Wilson down. He's in his late seventies and probably shouldn't be driving a car at all. He felt a bump while he was out driving Sunday night, but didn't think he'd really hit anyone until he read about Wilson in the papers this morning. Then he put two and two together and turned himself in. The paint from his car fender matches that on Wilson's clothes."

I felt distinctly foiled. "Couldn't this high school student actually have borrowed the death car without the owner's knowledge,

run down Wilson, and then returned the vehicle? And the owner, being in his seventies and not quite clear of recollection, might simply have *assumed* that he had been involved in the accident?"

"Not too likely. Besides, the third letter was written by the same person who wrote the other two."

I experienced a sort of fury. "How the devil can you come to a conclusion like that?" I managed to control myself and produce a smile. "Was the last letter written on the same typewriter as the first two?"

"No. Different typewriters entirely."

"Then what on earth makes you so damn sure the last letter was written by the same person who wrote the first two?"

"The stamp on the envelope."

"The stamp? Fingerprints on the stamp?"

"No," Waldo said. "No fingerprints."

A sudden and wild thought struck me. "Don't tell me you compared the tongue-prints on the backs of the stamps and they all matched?"

Waldo blinked at the suggestion. "Tongue-prints?" He nodded thoughtfully. "Why not? After all, we nailed that second-story man

by comparing his elbow with the elbow-prints on a windowsill." Then he shrugged. "No. We didn't compare tongue-prints. It was the stamps themselves."

"But one blasted stamp looks just like another."

"Well, yes. But the edges of the stamps would vary a bit. Where they were torn on the perforations, you know. We put them under a microscope and found that they had all been originally adjacent. From the same stamp book or sheet."

Waldo studied the chessboard, then continued, "The person who wrote those three letters lives in this very building."

I cleared my throat. "How do you arrive at that?"

Waldo moved N-B3. "Where did you say that James Wilson worked?"

"The Burley Sand and Gravel Company."

Waldo shook his head. "No. He was a janitor at the Slanky Toy Company."

I frowned. "But Mrs. Pender said—"

"She was wrong, Albert. She is over eighty and confuses people and time. The *previous* tenant of Wilson's apartment worked for Burley Sand and Gravel." He looked up. "And that brings us to a rather interesting point. Only

the writer of the letters, and Mrs. Pender, and you, Albert, think, or thought, that Wilson worked for Burley Sand and Gravel."

I felt a bit warm. "Mrs. Pender could have passed on that misinformation to *hundreds* of other people besides me."

Waldo smiled. "Possibly, Albert." He looked toward my covered typewriter. "I thought I heard you typing when I knocked."

"A personal letter," I said quickly. "Extremely personal."

Waldo rose and went to the typewriter.

"Waldo," I protested. "This is my private—"

Ignoring me, Waldo removed the typewriter cover and read the page still on the roller.

Dear Mayor or Chairperson of the City Council:

Well, I see that you men are bound and determined to destroy our lovely old established neighborhoods and landmarks by erect in those huge and ugly structures you call freeways.

For some time I have quietly

watched the many abuses of landscape and aesthetics by you Lords and Masters, but I can contain myself no longer. I am a person with an independent mind, not some plaything for a chauvinist pig. Which doesn't necessarily mean that I haven't had any offers!

Anyway, back to those dreadful freeways! Which reminds me, you don't see any women driving those big steamrollers and what have you out there, now do you? You men simply fear competition and never give women the opportunity to express themselves and rise above the sexist slave culture into which they are born!

Waldo finished reading what I had written so far and then nodded. "Sounds promising."

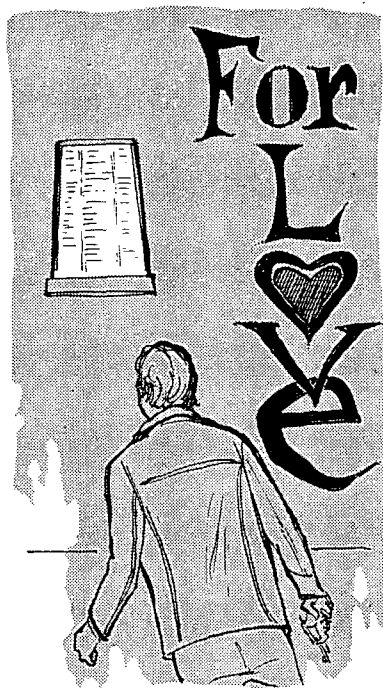
I sighed. "I suppose you'll have to arrest me?"

He frowned. "Albert, I don't want that damn freeway plowing through our neighborhood any more than you do. When you finish the letter, I'll mail it for you."

He sat down at the chessboard again. "Your move, Albert."



A singular purpose is frequently the instigator of an astonishing performance.



The taxi let Giroux off, as he had requested, in a residential area six blocks from Hopper Industrial Park. The night wind was cold, and he turned up the collar on his overcoat as he walked rapidly toward the park. The gun in his right coat pocket was icy against his palm.

It was just past nine when he reached the darkened, deserted industrial development. Giroux made his way carefully to the squat stone structure which housed the Moore Plumbing Supply Company. There was no sign of the night security he knew made periodic checks of the area. A single light burned in the office, behind blind-covered front windows, the only light in the otherwise abandoned park. As was his custom on Friday evenings, Moore was working late and alone on the company books.

Giroux moved around to the rear of the building, to the shadowed parking area. Only one car remained there—Moore's, of course, one he knew well. He had often seen it parked in the drive of the Moore house, diagonally across the suburban street from his own bachelor dwelling; and he

*by Bill
Dronzini*

had, in his position as an insurance broker, written the policy on the vehicle.

He walked some twenty yards distant, to the base of the high cyclone fence which ringed the supply-yard enclosure, and blended into the blackness there. Now, as he waited, he did not feel the coldness of the wind. His mind was focused on the singular purpose which had brought him here.

Moore left the building at exactly ten o'clock, habitually precise as always. Giroux tensed slightly, his fingers moving over the butt of his gun as he watched Moore reach the car and begin to unlock it. Then, quickly, he stepped out and approached the other man.

The sound of footsteps alerted Moore, and he glanced up jerkily, startled. Giroux stopped two paces in front of him. "Hello, Frank," he said.

Recognition smoothed the nervous frown on Moore's face. "Why—hello, Dave. You gave me a jolt, coming out of the darkness like that. What are you doing *here*, of all places?"

"Waiting for you."

"What on earth for?"

"Because I'm going to kill you," Giroux said.

"What?" Moore was staring at him incredulously. "What did you

say? I must not have heard—"

"I'm going to kill you, Frank."

"Hey, listen, that's not funny. Are you drunk?"

Giroux took out the gun. "I'm both sober and deadly serious."

An abrupt mixture of fear and anger shone in Moore's eyes as he said, "Dave, put that thing away. What's the matter with you? Why would you even think of killing *me*?"

"For love," Giroux said.

"For . . . what?"

"Love, pure and simple love. You're in the way, Frank; you stand between Becky and me, between our ultimate marriage. Does it all become clear now?"

"You—and Becky?"

Giroux smiled faintly, secretly.

"No, it's not true," Moore said in disbelief. "No, my wife loves me, she's devoted to me. She's too uncomplicated and too unimaginative even to consider a thing like infidelity, much less cold-blooded murder . . ."

"I have plenty of imagination, Frank," Giroux said. "More than enough to plan and execute the perfect murder."

"This is insane. *You're* insane, Giroux."

"Not at all. I'm merely in love, completely and irrevocably. Of course, I do have my practical side as well. There's the fifty thou-

sand dollar double indemnity policy on your life, with my company, and that will take care of Becky's and my needs quite nicely once we're married. After a decent interval of mourning, naturally. We can't have the slightest shadow of suspicion cast on her good name, or on mine."

"You can't do this, Giroux," Moore said. "I won't *let* you do it." He made a sudden jump forward, clawing at the gun, but his fear and his anger destroyed all coordination. Giroux sidestepped quickly, and brought the barrel of the weapon down on the side of Moore's head. Moore fell moaning to the pavement.

Giroux hit him again, sharply, to make sure he would not come out of it. He finished unlocking the car, dragged the unconscious man onto the floor in back, then slid in under the wheel.

He drove out of Hopper Industrial Park, still without seeing one of the night-patrol vehicles. Observing the exact speed limit, he followed the route which Moore always took to get home, a route which included a one-mile stretch through Old Mill Canyon. The canyon road was little used since the construction of a bypassing freeway, but Moore considered it a shortcut to the suburban area where he and Giroux lived, and

he drove the route almost daily.

There was a sharp curve at the very top of the canyon road, with a bluff wall on the left and a wide shoulder, studded with red guard-rail reflectors, on the right; beyond the rail was a sheer two-hundred foot drop into the canyon below. No cars followed Giroux as he took Moore's car along the road to the apex. Beyond the curve, the road leveled out and he could see for perhaps a quarter of a mile in that direction; there were no headlights.

Giroux stopped the car on the road, a hundred feet below the shoulder. He held a long breath and then pressed down hard on the accelerator; the car leaped ahead, and Giroux cramped the wheel until the machine was headed straight for the guardrail at the shoulder's edge. Then he braked sharply while the car was still on the road. The tires burned in violent screeches on the pavement, providing the skid marks which would confirm Moore's death as a simple tragic accident.

He managed to fight the car to a halt ten feet from the guardrail, rubbed perspiration from his forehead, and reversed to the road again. When he had set the emergency brake, he stepped out hurriedly and made sure they were still alone; then he pulled the still-

unconscious form of Moore from the rear floor, propped him behind the wheel, and wedged Moore's foot against the accelerator pedal. The engine roared loudly and the car began to rock. Giroux grasped the release lever for the brake, set himself, jerked the brake off, and flung his body out of the way.

With the sudden acceleration, the car hurtled forward. An edge of the open driver's door slapped against Giroux's hip, knocking him down, but he wasn't hurt. He rolled over in time to see Moore's car crash into and through the guardrail. It seemed to hang in space for a moment, amid a shower of wooden splinters, and then plunged downward; the still blackness was filled with the thunderous rending of metal as the car bounced and rolled into the canyon.

Giroux gained his feet and went to the edge and looked over. There was no fire, but he could see the mangled wreckage in the shadows below. He said softly, "I'm sorry, Frank. It's not that I hate you, or even disliked you. It's just that you were in the way."

Then, keeping to the heavier pockets of darkness along the side of the deserted road, he began the

long, three-mile walk to his home.

At eleven the following morning, Giroux stood on the porch of the sprawling ranch-style home which belonged—which had belonged—to Frank Moore. He rang the bell, and waited with his chest constricted in anticipation.

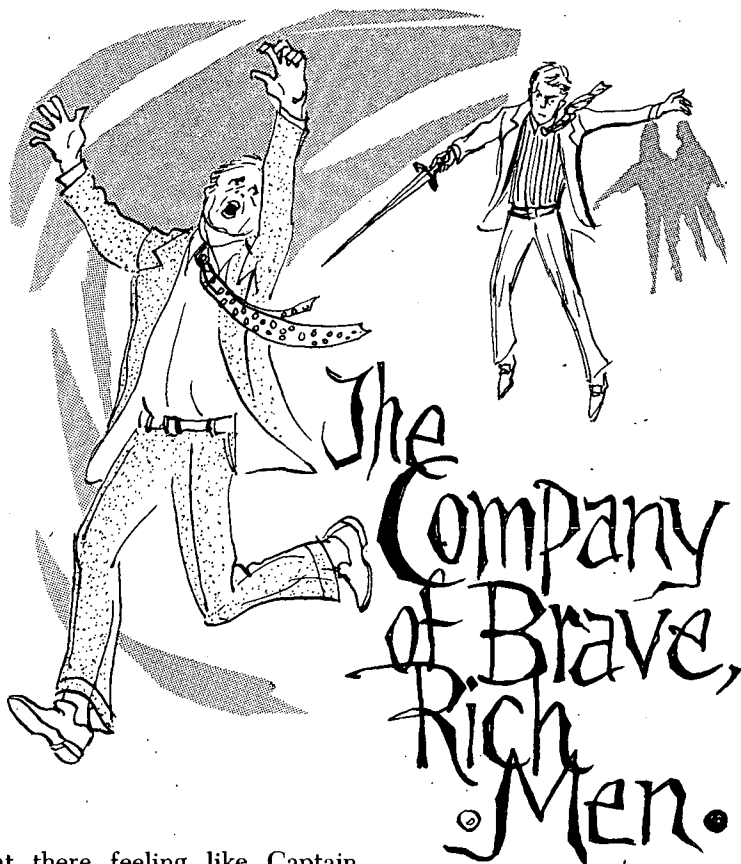
There were steps inside, the door opened, and Giroux faced the black-draped form of Becky Moore. He looked at her copper-colored hair, her soft amber eyes, her slender and sensual body, and his love swelled inside him until it was almost like physical pain.

"Hello, Becky," he said. "I just heard about Frank, and of course I came right over."

"Thank you." Her grief-swollen mouth trembled. "Thank you, Mr. Giroux. It was such a terrible accident, so . . . so *unexpected*. I guess you know how devoted Frank and I were to each other; I feel lost and horribly alone without him."

"You're not alone," Giroux said. Internally, he smiled his secret smile. "I know we've never really been anything except casual neighbors, Becky, but I want you to know that there isn't anything I wouldn't do for you; not *anything* I wouldn't do . . ."

Although the punishment seems warranted, the crime may be questionable.



I sat there feeling like Captain Queeg with these two little balls gripped in my fist—one black ball, one white—listening to Ted Rolf deliver his elongated rap on the

by Charles
W. Runyon

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purpose of the club, and wondered what would happen if I blackballed Norval Breene.

He sat halfway up the polished oak table, his big hands wrapped together in front of him, both fists together looking like some kind of knobbed squash. Good word, squash. That's what Breene did to people who got in his way. That's how he got his 44-outlet hardware chain. He had his head bowed, fat bulging around his size sixteen collar; but I didn't think you'd have to go very deep into the fat to find solid muscle. That bulge on his four-foot shoulders wasn't something the tailor put in his expensive suit of threads, either. I knew him when he could lift a two-hundred-pound air-conditioning unit and set it in a window like an empty egg crate.

Revise that. I didn't *know* him then, but I knew a person who did, and that's why the marbles were getting greasy in my palm. I decided to listen to Ted.

"... Refresh your memory with a brief recital of the rules for membership, if I may have your patience. The public image of a successful man, outside of organized athletics and the military services, is that of a cream puff. Insult him and he'll hire a lawyer to sue you for verbal assault. Rob him and he calls the cops. Kidnap

him and he pays off. He rides around in chauffeured limousines and the only exercise he gets is chasing his secretary around the office."

There was a polite chuckle at that. They'd heard it before and few of them had to chase their secretaries anywhere; being in charge of the hiring, they picked whatever kind they wanted.

"And it's true, I think," Ted continued, "that the majority are like that. Oh, they'll undertake dangerous safaris, they go hunting elk, but they're damn sure that their guides are reliable and their guns are powerful and they've got radio contact with civilization. They'll go out yacht-racing, and when the storm blows up they won't be the first to head back to the marina, but they won't be the last either. Got to stay alive, watch those tax-free municipal bonds mature. But we're different."

A mutter of agreement ran around the table. Norval Breene bent his big head and wrinkled his forehead. His heavy, handsome face wore a serious look, but I saw just the faintest muscle-twitch of a smile around his mouth. Smart man. Brilliant even. All he lacked was a conscience.

"Now you all know the rules for membership. Prospect must

risk sudden death. It must be a risk to life in which skill and strength have no part, but only the whim of fate. If you come through it, you've got the joy, the exhilaration of knowing that the gods are playing on your team. If you don't—well, time's up, old man. Tough. But. . ." he raised his clenched hand, "YOU NEVER KNOW UNTIL YOU TAKE THE RISK!" His thumping fist made the ash tray jump.

I looked across the table at Rodney Cole, our most recent member. Performed his qualifying feat in Acapulco with a dive into La Quebrada . . . and lived to tell about it. Not many amateurs do that. Oh, the locals do it—they've been practicing all their lives—but about once a year some gringo strings his guts over the rocks leading down into the chasm. Because it's tricky, you've got to know the tides, and you've got to start your dive when the rock is bare, timing it so you hit the exact crest of The Big One—and then you've got to have enough strength and agility to flatten your dive before you hit bottom and get your head jammed down between your hips.

Rod had brought the hotel manager back at his own expense to testify. Rule of the club, you've got to have a witness. Not that

anybody would use the word "liar." This was a tough bunch of hombres, but you couldn't tell it by looking. Rod was six-five and thin as an antenna. He traded commodities futures on the board of trade. Beside him, Amado Garcia looked like a pork-fat mariachi musician; actually his Tio Pepe taco joints covered five states. He won his membership paddling a kayak through a school of romping baleen whales.

So that's what it took: money, since dues were pegged at five grand per annum, and guts enough to throw it all in the lap of the gods, and in the presence of witnesses. The Latinos call it *machismo*. Some people handle live rattlers; others jump motor-bikes. We don't cover it up in religion, or sport, or anything like that. It's looking your Maker in the eye and saying: Here I am. Catch me if you can.

A lot have been caught.

We had a guy start off in a balloon from Casablanca, gambling that the prevailing westerlies would carry him to the Lesser Antilles. He lost. Another guy thought he could cross the freeway on a bicycle during rush-hour traffic. He made the biggest sailcat in history.

You're wondering about me. Raised on a ranch near a place

called Heart Mountain, Wyoming. When I was sixteen two boys and I jumped into an irrigation chute—that's a two-mile long flume that carries water from a mountaintop into a valley. You get up a speed of sixty per and then get zonked into the bottom of a stilling pool. We only did it once. One boy smashed his skull on the concrete sides and the other one got his guts ripped out by the weed-hooks that stuck up from the base about halfway down. I didn't go again because I knew I'd had my free ride and you only get one; the next time the big collector takes the toll. That was my assessment at age sixteen, and in the twenty-two years since then—during which I made a few trips around the world to inspect mining properties—I've made only a slight revision. Life's like a series of screens; if you go through one the next one'll have a little finer mesh, and the weave gets tighter and tighter until finally you're stopped dead.

Purpose of the club . . . well, it's just a game. Call it separating the men from the boys and you're only close. Point is, when you pass through one of those screens and find yourself still alive, you unload a lot of guilt you've been carrying and decide maybe you're not a bad character after all. Makes a

man easier to live with. Actually, we're a hearty, friendly bunch of guys—except for Norval Breene, who was a double-dyed rotter, and cruel besides. I don't like cruelty. It's a character flaw that can't be cured by mortal man. You punish a cruel man and it just makes him mean.

Breene was mean.

I don't know how he got that way. The flaw was there seventeen years ago when we worked in the same town. I was a mining engineer and he was assistant manager of a hardware store. We didn't know each other then, but a girl I was dating cashiered in the hardware store, so I knew who he was. Later on I worked in Chile, and finally bought a gold mine in Mexico which was losing money when gold was \$35 an ounce. During five years of sweat and toil I barely made enough for tortillas and beans, then the price of gold shot up to \$150 per ounce and I became a millionaire. I turned the mine over to my manager and came home to enjoy the company of my peers.

Most of my fellow millionaires were mushy and downright boring—a mixture of con men, percentage players, and silver-spoon types who lived on Daddy's dividends and never knew what the fight was about. That's how I got

the idea for the club. I bought a downtown building and rented out all the office space except one room. On that door I hung a sign: *Admittance only to the Brave*. When anyone knocked I didn't answer, because I knew he wouldn't be the kind of man I was seeking. A man with real guts won't stand out in the hall shuffling his feet and wondering if the sign means him. He'll kick the damn door open.

I got several kids who were probably illiterate, and some derelects who had nothing to lose, but after culling them out I wound up with five. Two failed the qualification test and came in D.O.A., which left three as a nucleus. Since then we've expanded our membership to twenty. Rodney Cole, of La Quebrada fame, is member #20 and I'm #1 but it doesn't mean anything. We're all equal. We've all proved ourselves, so there's no chest-thumping inside the club. We've got our own building now, which is unmarked except for some cabalistic symbols I copied off a Sufi temple in Khartoum. People just assume we're one of those secret clubs like the Shriners and Masons where middle-aged men get their kicks wearing turbans and carrying swords. We use swords in our initiation ceremony, but that's

just where the resemblance ends.

I had to break off my reminiscence when Ted Rolf introduced a thin, dark, ferret-eyed man he called Ali Ben-Youssef, whose home address was Ksar-es-Souk, Morocco. He ran a motorcycle agency there. He stood up and in French-accented English started laying out the scene. He had personally hauled Breene to a place called Tan-Tan, which sticks out about a hundred miles into the Sahara Desert, and let him out with a bundle of dried camel meat and a goatskin bag of water, and had watched him head out across the flat gray rock.

"My friends ask me, 'Why do you let this Roumi suicide himself?' I say, 'He chooses to put his life in the hands of Allah, this is acceptable; *non?* He desires to know if Allah is displeased with him for acquiring much gold and many wives. This is good, *non?*' And they agree, yes, it is acceptable and good, but it is still suicide . . ."

Ali Ben-Youssef had gone to Timbuktu and waited in that mud-walled city, one month, two. He gave Breene up for dead, but he had been paid to wait—so he waited. After three months had passed, he saw a speck crawling across the sand, far to the right of the camel track which led to the

city gate. He continued waiting by the gate, as he had been instructed to do, and at last, as the sun set behind the Moya Dji, he saw the thick black beard, the blue eyes burning in the sun-blistered blackened face. The Roumi, Norval Breene, had journeyed on foot across trackless, blowing sands, which not even the intrepid Blue Men dared to traverse without a caravan of camels.

Ali sat down amid loud applause. He'd told a good story, factually true from his point of view. My argument lay in his interpretation of the facts, but I kept quiet as we were served brandy, each glass carried in by a lovely girl in a very short dress. We had twenty serving girls, one for each member. If Breene was accepted, we'd put out feelers for another girl. Such are the prerogatives of wealth in a free society.

Rod opened the discussion, looking down and turning the glass of dark amber liquid in his long sensitive fingers. "Seems to me, you've got a situation here that rests more on endurance than chance."

That wasn't the problem I saw, and I noted frowns of disagreement on other faces. I cleared my throat and said, "Endurance couldn't possibly carry

you across 700 miles of waterless, trackless desert. The heat hits a hundred-thirty, and there's no shade. It sucks the moisture out of your cells. Your brain dehydrates, the body simply stops functioning. You go mad, you wander around, and you die. The only way you could make it is through incredible, blind luck—or else . . ."

I shrugged, and stopped. Everybody knew what I meant. *Or else* Norval had arranged somehow to be picked up by a helicopter and carried to within a few miles of Timbuktu, and then set down again; but there was no way of proving that. There could only be an absence of proof that he did do it, there could never be proof that he didn't. In the final analysis, we were left to rely on the word of Norval Breene. It was entirely a matter of confidence, and a blackball would be tantamount to calling him a liar and a fraud and a cheat.

I clicked those little balls in my hand while the discussion went on. Why couldn't Breene have given us a simple feat, witnessed by several persons, so there could be no question of his integrity? Then I could throw in my white ball and solve my personal dilemma.

I guess other members were having the same trouble because a

motion was made that we recess for a few hours and cast our votes at twelve midnight. I wandered around watching Breene shooting billiards and playing handball—making a hit with the other members. He wanted to get into the club and he did what was necessary. Now and then he'd look at me and I'd catch that cold, blank killer's stare in his eyes. I knew he had that sixth sense which is given to men who live by violence, the ability to sense hostility in others.

Norval was courting us, one by one, and my turn came at dinner. We each sat behind a pink fillet of Aberdeen Angus and engaged in the parry-thrust conversation of two men gauging the other's strength. Finally, when we had the cigars lit and the brandy in our paws, Norval said, "You used to work in Weber City; didn't you?"

I frowned, then I nodded. "Yes, it had almost slipped my mind. Just a little mining survey for the company I worked with at the time. I've even forgotten the name of the company. How'd you know about Weber City?"

"I worked there too. That's where I got my start."

"That's interesting," I said, in the same way you'd say that medieval heraldry was interesting, sort of blowing dust on the whole

subject, without further comment.

Norval went on, wanting to know if I knew this person or that person. I said they all sounded familiar, but I couldn't say for sure if I knew them or had just heard their names. Then he mentioned Helen York, and I had the presence of mind to say, "York? Wasn't she the city librarian?"

"No. She was a cashier in the hardware store where I got my start."

Well, I knew that, but I sipped my drink, frowned, and said, "I don't think I knew her. How about a game of chess before the vote? We've got another hour."

He led off with a Queen's Knight, and I countered with King's Pawn to Bishop Four. The opening game went sour for me because I was thinking about Helen York. She was one of those bright, blonde, happy, Midwestern girls who bust their girdles before they're forty, but catch them when they're twenty-five and you've got something really tender. Weber City was like any other medium-sized Midwestern town: chain stores and filling stations and an industry employing a couple hundred men, while the rest of the people lived by supplying them and their families with food, clothing and shelter. The store where Helen worked also

sold furniture and plumbing and TV's, so it was more department store than hardware. She told me about this drifter whom Mr. Ball had hired to install air-conditioning systems, who had proved so efficient that he'd made him assistant manager: Norval Breene.

Breene had made an effort to cuddle up with the girl—Helen was a type that drew that kind of attention anyway, and she rather enjoyed it—but then one day all the attention stopped. She noticed that Breene tended to disappear at certain times of the day. Experimenting, she found that the owner's wife was also unreachable during that particular time. Helen was a girl who could add one and one; she put it together and came up with an affair between Breene and his boss's wife. Nothing unusual in that, of course. I've been all over the world, and this sort of thing goes on everywhere, so I suspect it's incurable.

Anyway, Helen came to work one morning and found her boss slumped behind his desk. He'd apparently unlocked the gun case and taken out a .44 magnum and placed it against his temple. So many foot-pounds of muzzle-energy changes a man's head; the way she told it there was only a little round hole in the skull where the bullet went in, but

when it came out it carried off the whole left side of his head. Also the buildup of internal pressure blew his eyes clean out of their sockets. You could excuse her for losing her cool; actually the experience gave her such a mess of twitches that I wasn't too sorry when I was suddenly transferred out of town. We said goodbye after pledges of undying friendship, promises to write and all the usual stuff.

I went on to another town and another, and it all faded into a montage of furnished rooms and unfinished love affairs. I sent Helen a Christmas card from Chile where I went the following year, and it took eight months to come back to me marked: *Moved, left no address.* . .

Now, here was Norval Breene, sitting across from me at the chessboard, looking big and prosperous and respectable. He slid his rook into my king-row and said, "Mate."

I looked down at the board and saw that his rook had my king in check, while his knight covered the only open square. "Good game," I said, standing up.

He stood up too, which put my eyes on a level with his necktie. "I've got a feeling you play better than this, Jay. Something on your mind?"

"Business," I said, putting out my hand and getting it lost in his. "We'll have other games."

"Hopefully." He ducked his head in a boyish grin which no doubt melted the hearts of all the matrons in Weber City, but which I knew to be utterly phony. "You know, I still haven't been accepted as a member."

"Don't worry about it. We haven't blackballed a prospect yet." Then I smiled. "First time for everything though, right?"

"So they say," he said, and though his smile stayed in place, his eyes took on a killer flatness which I knew damn well was not phony—because the first thing I'd done when I learned that Norval had applied to enter the club was to call a man who'd done some tracing for me.

I gave him Helen's last known address and told him to find out where I could reach her. He reported back that she'd moved away five weeks after I did, broke off all contacts with her friends and relatives, and hadn't been heard from since. He also had some background on Norval, which I'd asked him to dig up in passing.

Norval had gone off like a skyrocket, it seemed, after his boss had committed suicide. Took over the store as manager, married his

boss' widow a year later, and started building his empire. Served as president of a service club, chamber of commerce, mayor, you-name-it. Voted citizen-of-the-year a few times, served in the state house on a couple of governor's commissions, and had just recently filed for U.S. Senator. *That's why he wants to get into the club*, I thought. *There's enough clout right here to put him into the seat . . .*

"Any evidence of foul play in that suicide?" I asked into the phone.

"Not a smidgen. His wife said he'd been depressed for several months, had threatened to kill himself. I checked out the old newspaper account. There wasn't any attempt to cover it up. He went to the store early that morning, took a .44 magnum out of the display case, sat down behind his desk and blew his brains out. I had a little conversation with the chief of police, who was only a patrolman at the time. He said there was no question in his mind that it was suicide, and you always get neurotic women making trouble for law enforcement officers. . ."

"Was he talking about Helen York?"

"He didn't give any names."

"Well, find Helen. You know,

she was a law-abiding girl. She wouldn't go underground. She'd take out social security, pay her taxes, buy a driver's license. . ."

"I know. What'll I say when I find her?"

"Just. . .that I'd like to chat about old times."

"Right," he said, and hung up.

Ten days passed, and he called me again. "Married, two kids, lives in Oregon. I told her what you said and she got very uptight. She doesn't want to talk about Weber City, she wants to forget it even existed. She said she has pleasant memories of you, but she wants to forget that she ever lived in that evil town. Now what?"

I thought a minute. "Tell her I respect her desire for privacy. Tell her I've run into Norval Breene and I've got a chance to help him or hinder him. Ask her what she thinks I ought to do."

Next day he called and said she'd promised to write. "I'm not to tell where she lives, her present name, or anything. I've got a feeling she's scared of somebody. Anyway, she said she'd put it all in the letter."

It came three days later, air-mail-special, with an extra seal of Scotch tape across the flap. Inside I found another sealed envelope which said: *Personal. To Mr. J.M. Hoxworth.* She knew enough about

office procedure not to trust it to any secretaries. I slit it with my letter opener and unfolded the sheets of double-spaced type-written copy:

"Dear Jay,

"I am writing this only because of our friendship so many years ago. Not from any desire to get even with N.B., whose full name I will not use because it would soil the paper. Is he married? No, don't answer that, please. In fact, I don't want you to answer my letter or try to get in touch with me ever again.

"I found Mr. Ball at his desk that morning. The oddest part of it was that always before N.B. had opened up first, he being so eager, and I didn't see him around anywhere. He didn't come in until ten o'clock, and he said he'd overslept. I suppose I could have believed him, but I didn't think about this until much later: Norval never overslept. He always got up at dawn and spent a half hour jogging, then opened the store at 7:30. Mr. Ball would come in around 8:00 and go back to his desk, then the rest of the employees were due in at 8:30. On this particular morning I went in early because I wanted Norval to move my file cabinet. I couldn't find him so I went on back and opened the door of Mr. Ball's of-

fice. Well, there he was. I ran out, but the front door had been shut and locked from the *outside*. I'd just gone through, and I know I couldn't have done it. Then I heard footsteps coming from the storage room in back. I was scared, hysterical. I called the police from my own desk and after they came I sneaked back into the storage room. Nobody was there. The rear door had been closed and locked with a key. Since this is where we kept the air-conditioners and where repairs were made, Norval had a key. I don't know that he was back there. I only know that he *usually*. . . well, I'll say every day for the last six months, he'd come to work at 7:30, and this day he didn't. Whether I would have said it at the trial, I don't know, because there wasn't any trial. Mrs. Ball said her husband had been depressed, but if he was it certainly didn't show. He'd laughed and joked with me just the day before, and we had made his reservations for a buying trip to Chicago. He said he'd like to take me with him, since Mrs. Ball didn't feel like going and he needed somebody to keep him out of trouble. I would have said that the chances of finding him dead by suicide the next day were about one in one hundred.

"Well, maybe your detective found out what happened to Mrs. Ball. I'll just add what I know from a very confidential friend with whom I kept in touch after leaving Weber City. She was already sucking heavy on the bottle, and after she got married to N.B. it got a little worse. She ran over a pedestrian while drunk and lost her license, but there were no charges in the old home town because by now Norval Breene was a Very Influential Citizen. (His special friend got appointed to the sergeant's spot, and later became chief of police. He's the one who investigated Mr. Ball's death. Am I getting through to you?)

"I guess I'm still bitter about it, but what can anyone do after seventeen years? Mrs. Ball got on some high-power tranks to break her lush habit and after about two years of wedded bliss she took an overdose. D.O.A. at the local hosp. Who made the investigation? I leave you to guess, but if you guess anybody but the chief of police and Norval's special friend; you're dead wrong.

"I'm going to seal this now and quit. I could go on to say a few things about how Norval built up his business, but I won't. I watched him get bigger and bigger and more and more arrogant and I knew there was no way the

courts could get him. I don't really care what happens to him, but should he win this election that I hear he's running in, the country will soon be in worse shape than it is now.

"Wishing you a long and happy life.

Helen"

I carried the letter in my breast pocket as we milled around the door to the meeting room. I had the same certainty that Helen did, that Norval had gotten away with murder once, twice, maybe more—and I knew, as she did, that the courts couldn't touch him. Could I? Well, I wasn't sure.

You understand my dilemma? Why I couldn't just say: Look here, I know this is irregular, but we can't have Norval Breene in the club. He's a murderer.

Well, they would ask for proof; and I would pull out the letter.

The members would laugh—some of them. They would say: Jay, you're taking that chess game too hard. Others would employ their nitpicking talents at finding holes in Helen's story. They would say: Well, Jay, look at it objectively. She was obviously in love with the guy and he jilted her for the boss' wife. Naturally she's bitter. Probably everything she says is true. But it's only the way she puts it together that makes it look

damaging. Anyway, we're not here as a court of law. We're here to measure a man's bravery. . .

The only one sympathetic would be Rod—and probably Amado. Rod had told me earlier that he didn't like the way Norval talked to the girls, and Amado had caught an ethnic slur in some joke Norval told, and Norval had a patronizing air toward him.

Oh yes, they'd enjoy black-balling Norval—which would serve the purpose of keeping him out of the club—but I didn't like to put them in that bind. Norval could easily find out who had black-balled him. As far as I knew, he hadn't murdered anyone for seventeen years, but it's like getting an olive out of a bottle, so they say.

Ted held up the leather dice cup, showing that it was empty, nothing up either sleeve, parodying the magician's spiel in order to break the tension which suddenly twanged in the room.

Thunk. Ben Weinreb dropped the first ball in the cup. It would be a white one. Ben and Norval had hit it off well.

Clunk. Amado's. He didn't look at Norval—which meant nothing. Amado was the kind of guy who'd vote him into the club, then sweat him later.

Even now, perspiration beaded

Norval's forehead. It made me realize how anxious he was to get into the club, and how mad he'd be if he were kept out.

I wasn't afraid. I just couldn't decide the best way to deal with him. If he were to become a member, I would be sworn to uphold his honor and defend his life against outsiders. (A touch of melodrama, nothing more. Very few of us ever suffered danger from outsiders, except for an occasional street-mugger; and very little of that, since we rarely walked the streets, and our chauffeurs were always armed.)

As a nonmember he'd be on the outside, and I wouldn't know which flank to guard against. . .

Thunk. The leather cup was placed in my hand. I made my decision, worked one of the balls forward in my palm, peeked to make sure of its color, and dropped it into the cup.

When it had gone all around the table, Ted took it in one hand, capped it with the other, and stood there looking around like a pitcher checking the base runners.

He slammed the cup upside down on the table and lifted it. The balls spilled out in a cascade of ivory which rolled the length of the table and pattered on the floor; not a blackball in the bunch.

Well, Norval Breene was IN.

Everybody stood up and started singing the club song, and Norval Breene was grinning and looking foolishly pleased. The members got up to shake his hand one by one, then we all trooped down into the basement for the initiation. The usual thing, Ted read the bylaws about holding up honor and defending the life of a fellow club member. When you went through that door—Ted waved in the general direction of the front entrance—you entered a land where the laws of the nation had been superseded by the rules of the club.

"... Inside these hallowed walls a decision by the membership in council is final. We as a group hold the power of life and death over individuals. Is that understood, Norval Breene?"

"It is."

"And do you accept these conditions?"

"I do."

"Then by the authority vested in me by the members of this society, I dub thee. . ." Ted dragged a curved saber from his sash and touched Norval's shoulder, "... Knight of the Loyal Company of Brave Men. Go now, and stand against the far wall. You are about to be initiated."

Norval walked with measured

stride to the concrete-block wall, turned, and lifted his chin. His heavy jaw thrust out, and he seemed to be looking at me with a baleful malevolence. Had he somehow learned about my contact with Helen? Possible. It was also possible that he'd learned the nature of the initiation he was about to undergo—but hardly likely.

While the members were drawing their swords from the armorer, Rod came over and asked me if I'd gotten some bad news.

I said, "We've all got bad news, I think."

"Yes." Rod turned to look at Norval. "I admit I heard some bad stories about how he built up his business. Hijacked shipments, muscle, thievery, burglary. But—" he shrugged, "I couldn't bring myself to drop the blackball. After all, we're not an ethical society. What about you? Why didn't you drop it?"

"Because I've got a theory about murderers," I said, handing him the letter. While he was scanning it I got on the tail of the line to draw my initiation sword. Rod was a speed-reader; he fell into the rank beside me as we stood facing the initiate. I felt the letter slide into my pocket.

"So he is a murderer. I believe her. What's your theory?"

"Let's let the initiation take its course, shall we?"

Someone turned on the black-light, and above Norval's head glowed the words:

Truth is Courage

Cowardice is Death

Ted's voice boomed over the speaker: "NOW YOU ALL KNOW THAT ONCE BROTHER BREENE IS IN THE CLUB, NO MEMBER'S HAND CAN BE RAISED AGAINST HIM! THEREFORE, IF ANY MEMBER HERE HOLDS RANCOR AGAINST THIS MAN, LET HIM SPEAK IN FULL CONFIDENCE THAT HIS WORDS WILL NOT LEAVE THIS CHAMBER!"

I said, "I have no accusation. I have a question."

"NOVICE BREENE, ARE YOU PREPARED TO ANSWER?"

"Certainly."

"ASK YOUR QUESTION, MEMBER HOXWORTH!"

"The question is this: Did you, or did you not, murder, kill, or otherwise cause the death of Lucas Ball, owner of the Square Deal Hardware in Weber City, Illinois, in the year nineteen hundred and fifty-eight?"

Norval's face turned purple. "What the hell is this, Hoxworth?"

"NOVICE BREENE, THIS IS MERELY A QUESTION, NOT

AN ACCUSATION. NO CHARGES WILL BE BROUGHT, NOR WILL ANY OF YOUR ACTIONS PRIOR TO YOUR INITIATION BE CALLED INTO ACCOUNT OR EVEN REMEMBERED BY YOUR FELLOW MEMBERS. NOW ANSWER THE QUESTION. DID YOU OR DID YOU NOT—WHO WAS THAT AGAIN, JAY?”

“Lucas Ball.”

“DID YOU OR DID YOU NOT KILL LUCAS BALL? A SIMPLE YES OR NO WILL SUFFICE.”

Norval’s face twisted in a spasm of hate.

“Yes! Dammit, yes! I shot him! He worked me day and night and took all the profit for himself. I saw a way to get it all. What the hell, I can name two or three of you standing there who’ve done worse—”

“THAT IS SUFFICIENT. MEMBERS, HOW DO YOU FIND THIS MAN?”

“GUILTY AS CHARGED!”

“AND THE PUNISHMENT?”

“DEATH! DEATH! DEATH!”

It wasn’t the twenty men with drawn swords sprinting across the

room which caused Norval Breene to flunk his initiation. If he’d kept his head he’d have recalled that the only capital offense listed in our bylaws is cowardice.

Or, even if he hadn’t thought, he could have reflected that there was only one door to the basement. It stood at the top of a staircase and was obviously barred and padlocked—therefore he might as well stand tall and die like a man. All of us had made a similar decision, otherwise we wouldn’t be here—but Norval ran.

Amado danced in and planted his sword in Norval’s armpit, then danced out of the way as blood spewed out and splattered on the concrete floor. Rod came in with a straight thrust just below the sternum, and Norval’s last words were choked by a rush of blood. His feet slid apart, and he sat down with a look of puzzlement on his face. Immediately he submerged in a crowd of members with elbows pumping. By the time I got there nineteen swords stuck out of his body.

I put mine in his belly, just to make it unanimous.



When there's enough interest, one may ignore his principle.

Those Who Appreciate Money

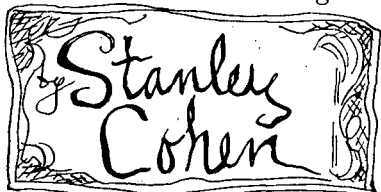
He fingered the white card thoughtfully for a moment, studying the rows of repeated digits which ran its full length. He touched the corner of the card to his lip and then nodded. He'd hesitated long enough. The advance preparations had been made for quite a while. Time to put the plan into motion. Fascinating toys, computers—at least to those who know how to use them; really use them.

He glanced around the computer room at the technicians doing their thing. They weren't paying any attention to his contemplative posture in the chair in front of the keypunch. Why should they? It was a most famil-

iar sight to see him there. He ran the operation. He was their mentor, their trainer, their confidant and father-confessor; the renowned wunderkind and genius who taught them everything they knew about the role of the computer in modern banking, the mastermind who had toiled all those brutal hours, often far into the night, and had established and debugged all of the streamlined procedures that made the bank the envy of all the others in the city.

Even if they were to wander near and stand behind him and watch over his shoulder, they would not grasp what he was about to do, because they knew

their specific jobs and not too much more. They knew what he had taught them and what he felt they had a need to know in order to carry out their work with crisp efficiency—but they would not understand the complex, yet ever so simple little operation he was going to perform. Even if they thought they did comprehend it, they wouldn't believe it. Not after all his lectures about the legal as-



pects of the work in which they were involved—absolute adherence to the law. He had trained them well.

His hand trembled slightly as he inserted the first card into the keypunch. He hoped no one noticed because he wasn't ever supposed to show even the slightest manifestation of having nerves. He was Rich Hamzer, the whiz kid. His veins were copper wire and his head was transistorized. He glanced around once again, rubbed his hands together a few times, took a deep breath and then began to hit the keys.

He completed the eight new cards and touched the corner of each with a red felt-tip pen. He

walked to the card storage and as he did, the trembling worsened—his pulse accelerated. He opened the appropriate drawer and began inserting the eight cards in their proper locations, lifting out those he was temporarily replacing. Then he lifted a few other cards at random and dotted them with felt-tip pens of other colors—green, blue, brown—before slipping them back down into place. This would make the red dots less obvious.

With all of the new cards in their proper places, he riffled the deck, watching the marked cards disappear like a drink poured into the sea. Then he closed the drawer: Done. The cards were a part of the vast system and the system would make no judgment but would do as it was told.

Rich picked up a phone and dialed Harry Linderkorn's number.

Linderkorn's ruddy face was ruddier than usual against the meticulously groomed silver temples and the custom-made shirt, and he sat very erect. Hamzer slouched in the "client's" chair in front of the huge desk.

"Did you say resign? Rich, I won't hear of it."

"Harry, you already have."

"But why?"

"I'm sick of working."

"Take some time off. How about a month? Two months?"

"How about a year, Harry, or two years? Why not five?"

"You serious? You won't like it, Rich. You'll hate it."

"Let me try it and decide for myself."

"All right, Rich. How about a raise? A fat one."

"Harry, you haven't been listening. A little more money won't change my life-style. This is Monday morning. Two weeks' notice means a week from Friday. That's it."

Linderkorn paused and his eyes reflected a change in strategy. "Rich, this place is a miracle of modern banking efficiency because of what you've done here. It's a living tribute to your achievements. We're the standard by which others are measured. Don't walk away from it and let it run the risk of even the slightest loss of its vitality and perfection. We can redefine your job so that you can enjoy a change in life-style without leaving."

"Harry, I've checked and rechecked the program and it's bug-free. Get one of your headhunters to find you a bright young D.P. manager-type and I'm sure he can keep things running without problems."

"Rich, how about unlimited

privileges at the Midtown Tennis Club? Play every day—as long as you wish. I'll even line you up a parade of worthy opponents. And just come around the bank once in a while to see how things are going."

"A week from Friday, Harry."

Rich stood in the main banking room and watched the lines of depositors inch forward, reach the tellers' windows, complete their transactions and walk away. Sixteen tellers were working—and there were over two hundred branch banks with three to ten tellers in each! The effects of the new punched cards, like Pentothal into a vein, had flowed silently into the system, been absorbed and produced the desired changes. Nine more business days to go, with extended banking hours on Thursdays and Fridays.

What would be the total for the two-week period? The total, based on all interest accrued on all funds deposited during that period. What would be the total amount of remainder involved when all interest computations were rounded off to even pennies? Not evened-off dollars; just evened-off pennies. What sweet, young teller would notice that all the computations just happened to come out to exact cents and not

fractions? Even if someone noticed, would it make enough of an impression to prompt that someone to question? If that someone did question, could the cause of the unusual coincidence be uncovered, particularly within the period up to a week from Saturday when his plane lifted off the ground? A long series of ifs. The likelihood of an accusing finger ever being pointed at him seemed remote. He had every reason to feel secure. Even if the coincidence were noted, he himself would be the one called in to investigate the quirk.

At the end of the two weeks of business he would simply locate and remove the red-dotted, outlaw cards and put back the originals. Then things would return to normal. The surface of the bank's monetary waters would remain undisturbed. The tiny tremor of illicit activity that had occurred deep beneath its surface would quietly subside and life would go on as if no renegades had ever made their subtle raid on the bank's remote vaults.

The outlaw cards would program the system to take all those rounded-off interest payments, those millions of fractions of pennies, and funnel them quietly into his own account. The system was omnipotent, but it was docile. It

had no power to challenge a command.

Weeks before, Rich had set up an arrangement whereby all monies in his account in excess of what he had set as a suitable operating balance would be automatically transferred to an account in a Swiss bank. Two weeks of business—and two weeks was enough. Hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of pieces of pennies—possibly a million if it proved to be a good two weeks for banking—and no one would have to suffer. Who would miss it? By then he would have bought his escape from his squirrel-cage existence, retiring to the idyllic life of the richest ski and tennis bum on the Continent, living off the interest the money would earn in Switzerland, hardly touching the principal at all. Those who appreciate money hate to touch the principal.

Rich fidgeted for the rest of the day. He knew there was no need for concern, but simply knowing wasn't quite enough to keep him tranquil. He called a friend and arranged a tennis match at his indoor club for that night. A little strenuous exercise would take his mind off things and help him get in some good sleep, which he began to feel might become an elu-

sive commodity in the days ahead.

They played hard and he enjoyed it. He was a tiger, really on his game, and for the first time ever he completely overpowered his friend. After more than two hours of enervating play and a quick shower, he emerged from the club into the chill night air and promptly sneezed two, three, four times. It had been stupid to rush out into the cold. He should have killed a little time before leaving, hung around, had a drink, taken time to cool down fully and unwind. He felt a drop of rain, then a drop or two more and then a steady rain. He looked around for a cab but there are never cabs when it begins to rain. He sneezed again and wiped at his nose with his sleeve. He began hustling toward the subway, still watching for an empty cab. By the time he reached the subway, his nose was dripping steadily.

A double Scotch and two aspirin had little effect on anything and he lay awake most of the night, sopping at his nose with tissues and throwing the little balls of shreddy wet paper at a wastebasket in the corner of the room. He crawled out of bed the next morning with a whopper of a cold, but with only nine days of his professional career left, he was determined to show up at work.

He made it through the day, but his cold grew steadily worse. By midafternoon his head was clogged solid. Excessive amounts of various antihistamines made him groggy but failed to penetrate the total blockage behind his nose and eyes. He went home early, dosed himself with a little of everyone's recommended, guaranteed remedy and went to bed, feeling certain that only long hours of sleep would help. Yet somehow, a dancing line of computer cards with tiny red dots in their corners always seemed to stay between him and unconsciousness. When he dragged himself out of bed again the next morning, his head throbbed, but once again he was determined to make it to the bank.

By midafternoon his entire body ached and everyone remarked that he looked terrible and shouldn't have come in. When Harry Linderkorn snapped that he should get the hell out of there before he infected everybody in the place, he finally left the bank and returned to his flat. Desperate for sleep, he resorted to sleeping pills, something he had somehow gone without the two previous nights, and took three instead of the prescribed one. The dancing computer cards moved quickly aside and total sleep engulfed him.

He was awakened by the phone.

"You any better?" It was Harry Linderkorn.

"I don't think so, Harry."

"I called you yesterday and you didn't even answer. Where were you?"

"I'm not even sure there was a yesterday."

"When I called you yesterday, I was merely being concerned about you. Today we've got a problem."

"What kind of problem, Harry?"

"One of your crew dropped a deck of cards."

"Tell him to pick them up."

"Rich, they're afraid to put things back together without you there."

"The cards are encoded sequentially. I've taught them better than that. They can do it."

"They insist that they need you."

"Harry, I'm not sure I'm going to live."

"Rich, this bank has got to pay continuous interest on all its accounts. We compound daily. Remember?"

Rich hesitated. "Why did they pull *that* drawer, anyway?"

"I don't know. I only know that we've got to get that deck back in place. Correctly. Rich, I'm sending a car for you."

Rich sighed. "When, Harry?"
"Be ready in an hour."

Rich walked very slowly as he entered the bank, heavily bundled up, his entire body in pain, his head feeling ballooned all out of proportion. He had been awake very little during the two days just past. He awoke once and called his physician. He got up once more to answer the door and receive the medication the doctor had prescribed. The new medication had kept him heavily sedated. He felt he could lose control of himself at any moment.

He entered the computer room where his staff of helpers led him to a desk and he dropped himself into the chair. They clustered about him and talked earnestly about how the mishap occurred and why they had the drawer out and how sorry they were and how terrible they felt and all the reasons why they were afraid to try and restore the system to operation without his supervision; but he found he was unable to concentrate on anything they were saying.

Spread out on the desk top were the drawer, partly filled, and the rest of the deck, a few of the cards organized into neat stacks, most of them still loose. He spotted two or three of the ones

with the red dots. He picked up a handful and looked at them, trying to make out the print at the tops, but the printed characters blended into the cards. He strained to focus his eyes at the hazy little block letters which faded and swam and spiraled and darted about. "It's no use," he said. He slumped back into his chair. "I can't see them. I can't do anything. It's no use." He closed his eyes and slumped further and then fell forward and laid his head on the desk. As his consciousness faded, he heard one of his girls say that they had better get help.

Rich awoke amid the muffled sounds and special smells of a hospital room. He glanced around briefly at the washed-out pastel hues of his institutional surroundings and then out the window at the familiar skyline. He closed his eyes and fell back asleep. He awoke again when a nurse came in to check his temperature and pulse. He watched her take the thermometer from his mouth and then jot notes on his chart. "How long have I been here?" he asked.

"It's Saturday. You came in yesterday."

"Who's paying for such a fancy room?"

"That's not my concern." She smiled without looking up from

the chart. "I'm here to nurse you."

"Am I getting better or worse?"

A nurse's smile of assurance. "I'd say better. But try to sleep some more. It's the best thing for you."

He watched her leave and then shifted his weight slightly and eased back into sleep.

A hand touched his arm. He looked up and saw Harry Linderkorn and behind him, a stranger. Who was the stranger? Rich's pulse began to quicken as he looked at the other man's expressionless face: young, bright, interesting, but no sign of anything.

"How are you feeling?" Harry asked.

Rich studied Harry's face for a clue. Nothing. "The nurse told me I'm getting better." He looked past Harry at the other man. Who was he?

"They tell me you'll be fine," Harry said. "It'll just take a little while."

"How long?" Rich asked.

"What's your hurry? You've got plenty of time."

What did *that* mean? He looked at the other man again. Still no indications. "Harry, what about the bank? You get things back together?"

"Business as usual, Rich. Our depositors won't lose a penny. I

brought in Jennings here on a consultant basis to get the system straightened out and back in operation. Rich Hamzer, Clint Jennings."

"Nice meeting you, Rich," the young man said. "Quite a program you've set up. It's becoming the standard for the whole industry. I was delighted to have the opportunity to look at it."

Rich scrutinized his expression, searching for an offbeat reaction. "Did you have any problem getting the system back together?"

"No problems. The cards were sequential."

"And you were impressed with the way it's set up?"

"Very much so," Jennings answered, but there wasn't so much as a wisp of a smile as he spoke. He apparently had not deduced the significance of the eight cards with the red dots.

"I'm glad everything is okay again," Rich said.

"We'll leave now so you can go back to sleep," Linderkorn said. "Besides, I'm late for my golf date. Just wanted to bring Clint by to meet you. And, of course, to show you that I care."

"Nice meeting you, Rich," Jen-

nings said with a completely guileless smile. "Take it easy."

It was late evening when a hand touched Rich's shoulder again. Visiting hours had passed and the nurses had made their evening rounds. Rich rolled over and looked up through the haze from his medication. He saw Jennings, who was smiling broadly. As he concentrated on Jennings' face he noticed, even in the dim light, that the smile had changed and taken on a new dimension.

"How're you doing, pardner?" Jennings asked with his broad grin. He snapped on a small light.

"Wha'? You came back tonight? Why?"

"Wanted to bring you something."

"Bring me something? What?"

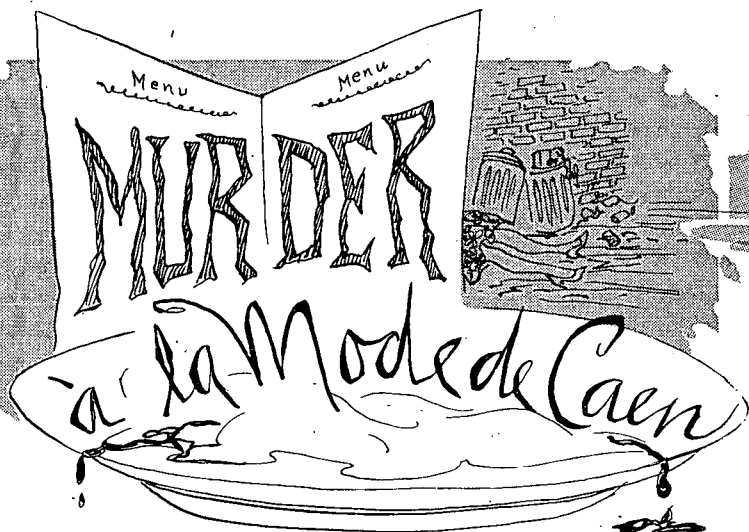
"A present for you." Jennings held out a small object.

Rich took it and examined it—a red felt-tip pen.

"Tell me, pardner," Jennings said, "how're we going to spend all that interest?"

Rich looked at the pen again and then back at Jennings' grinning face. "How's your tennis game?" Rich asked.

One who is addicted to a certain habit may well take note.



Paris was gray and depressing. Chief Inspector Damiot clutched his topcoat and pulled the brim of his hat down against the rain as he left the Préfecture and, keeping close to the massive building, headed for Place Dauphine. A good lunch would brighten this miserable day.

The Quai des Orfèvres was deserted. In another month, with the start of spring weather, there would be young couples leaning against the parapet, eating their

lunch from paper bags. In two months, the tourists would be hurrying along the quai toward the cathedral at the far end of the Place du Parvis, most of them unaware that they were passing the Palais de Justice.

Must remember to phone Sophie and tell her whether or not he would be home for dinner. Or should he see Olympe tonight? Decide about that later.

He had spent the morning in his office studying the dossier of

the Dumolin case, and he had reached a solid blank wall. No idea where to go next, which direction to take . . .

More than a week had passed since Sylvie Dumolin's body was found in that alley near the Square Louvois, with not a clue to what she had been doing there. Certainly she wasn't on her way home to the small apartment, near Place de la Republique, where she lived with her mother and younger sister. Something must have drawn her there at the end of the day, after she left the fancy lingerie shop on Rue Marbeuf.

Sylvie Dumolin was one of

by Vincent
McConnor

those average-looking girls who go through life unnoticed until they are murdered. Then for a few days they become celebrities before they vanish again, forgotten by everyone but their family and, of course, the murderer.

The Dumolin case had lasted in the papers for two days but now, after more than a week, the reporters had newer and more important stories to cover.

The dead girl would be forgotten until he found her strangler. Then there would be a final small

item which most people wouldn't notice. After that, Sylvie Dumolin would disappear again until her killer was brought to trial. When that ended she would vanish forever.

Damiot turned into Place Dauphine, so preoccupied with the Dumolin case he didn't realize that the rain was getting heavier, and headed straight for the entrance of the Petit Dauphin.

He entered the restaurant, sniffing the warm air to detect what was being served for lunch. Damiot bowed toward the plump figure in black, perched on her stool at the cashier's desk.

"Bon jour, M'sieur Inspecteur. Your table is free."

"Merci, Madame." He moved on through the narrow room, nodding to several acquaintances and associates, and sat down at his customary table as his favorite waiter appeared from the kitchen.

"M'sieur Inspecteur! I thought this rain might bring you in today."

"Bon jour, Emile. Do I smell *boeuf bourguignon*?"

"Only one portion left, M'sieur. I asked the chef to save it for you."

"Bien! But no wine today."

The old man looked stricken. "No wine?"

"I'm on my *régime* again. For a

few days . . .” He hesitated, briefly. “But I will have a dry vermouth. Perhaps a small slice of *pâté*?”

“Certainly, M’sieur.”

Damiot frowned, his mind returning to the dossier he had left on his desk. He wondered where the strangler would be eating lunch today. Did the memory of the dead girl spoil his appetite? Or had he put all thoughts of Sylvie Dumolin out of his head? Not likely. In most cases the victim becomes an obsession with the killer, always with him. Sylvie Dumolin would be with the strangler. Now. This very moment.

Was the murderer in some restaurant trying to decide what to order for his lunch? Which restaurant? If only he knew he could go there and arrest the man. Had to be a man! Few women were strong enough to strangle anyone. Probably a young man . . .

Would the killer be eating lunch in one of the *arrondissements* where the dead girl had lived or worked? Number eleven or eight? Or number two where she had died? Hundreds of restaurants in those three *arrondissements*. They covered a lot of territory. Three of the busiest neighborhoods in all Paris . . .

Damiot realized that his *apéritif* had been set in front of him.

Maybe the killer had met Sylvie Dumolin that night, near the Opera. Was their meeting an accident or did they have an appointment?

They could have eaten dinner on the Boulevard des Italiens or in a café on one of the side streets. Afterward they might have walked to the Square Louvois and sat on one of the benches as they discussed their problems. There had to be a problem, although the autopsy showed that the Dumolin girl wasn’t pregnant.

Perhaps they had quarreled and she tried to escape, running down side streets, away from the square, fleeing from her murderer. He would have run after her, pulled her into that alley where nobody could see what he was going to do . . .

There was money in her handbag so robbery wasn’t involved . . .

The autopsy report said that Sylvie Dumolin had eaten dinner—steak and *pommes frites*. She had drunk some red wine and, for dessert, there had been apple tart—the sort of food that was served in every Paris *arrondissement*.

Damiot became aware of old Emile setting the *pâté* in front of him.

Maybe he should check restaurants in two of those *arrondisse-*

ments, where she worked and where she died, and ask if they had ever seen Sylvie Dumolin . . .

He could show a photograph of the dead girl to waiters and, especially, to the woman at each cashier's desk, part of whose job was to welcome back anyone who returned to their restaurant for a second meal; and, of course, the regulars were old friends.

This was something he had overlooked! Find where Sylvie Dumolin had eaten, ask if there had been a man with her. He would have to check restaurants during the dinner hours when all their waiters would be on duty. Her mother said she had stayed out frequently for dinner.

"Never too late, mind you, M'sieur," Madame Dumolin had told him. "Always home before midnight. I'm afraid she didn't like the food I gave her."

"Have you any idea where she ate, Madame?" he had asked.

"She never told me, M'sieur. Always when she came home at night she would go straight to her room. Never liked to be questioned about where she'd been. So I didn't ask."

Perhaps he should have gone into that at greater length with her mother and sister, and with the other girls who worked in that

shop. He would do that this afternoon instead of returning to his musty office. He would see Madame Dumolin again—after he finished his lunch.

"I've no idea, M'sieur Inspecteur. I never knew where Sylvie ate when she didn't come home for dinner. She wasn't one to say anything about her friends or where she'd been."

"Did she mention the names of any restaurants?" Damiot asked, seated on an insecure chair that protested every time he moved.

"Not to my knowledge. No . . ." Madame Dumolin peered around the dim sitting room as though there might be something hidden in the shadows that might remind her.

Damiot glanced at a framed photograph of the dead girl on a chest of drawers: In the dim light seeping through the rain-splashed windows he could barely see her smiling face, not really pretty but not unattractive. How she must have hated this shabby apartment after spending all day in that expensive lingerie shop. Everything neat and clean here but it would seem dull to a young girl. The upholstery on the ugly sofa was faded and worn. One lace window curtain had been torn and repaired.

"... spent most of the money she earned on clothes," Madame Dumolin was saying. "Every month a new dress."

He remembered a row of dresses hanging in the dead girl's armoire; bright colors, looking expensive in contrast to the second-hand furniture in her cramped bedroom. No point in asking to look through her room again. He had found nothing on his earlier visits; no trace of the girl who had occupied the room, except her clothes and jars and tubes of cosmetics and rows of perfume bottles on her makeshift dressing table.

"... never ate enough." Madame Dumolin shook her head, recalling old arguments. "No time for a decent breakfast before she left for work in the morning. She would drink her coffee while she dressed and go rushing down the steps with her coat still unbuttoned, pulling a scarf over her head. Always late . . ."

"What about lunch?"

"She told me that on most days she had *pommes frites* with a glass of wine. That's all she could afford after she bought some new clothes and paid a few francs to me each week."

"Where did she eat lunch?"

"I never asked. Probably near the shop where she worked. I

don't know that section. I've not seen the Champs-Elysées in ten years."

"If she had nothing but coffee for breakfast and *pommes frites* for lunch she must've been hungry for her dinner every night."

"Not when she came home! I would fix a nice *cassoulet* but she only picked at it. My other daughter, Yvonne, will eat anything I cook for her. No trouble at all."

"Where is Yvonne this afternoon?"

"She's home from school today, with a cold."

"Could I speak to her? Perhaps she may remember places where her sister ate."

"I doubt that. Yvonne was always asleep before Sylvie came home." Turning toward the open door to the hall, she called, "Yvonne? Where are you, *chérie*?" She scowled, then raised her voice. "Yvonne!"

A door opened in the depths of the apartment.

"Yes, Maman?"

"What are you doing there?"

"Nothing."

"The inspector wants to speak with you."

"But Maman . . ."

"Come! This instant." Madame Dumolin shook her head. "You never know what they're up to

when they're out of your sight. I can tell you, M'sieur Inspecteur, wherever Sylvie ate dinner when she was out, she had a steak. That's the only thing she liked. Any kind of steak! Here at home, since her father died, we can't afford steaks."

Damiot restrained himself from telling her that Sylvie had eaten steak the night of her death; better not mention the autopsy report.

"Yes, Maman?"

He turned to see the skinny teen-age girl, posed in the open doorway, wearing a flowered dress—white with big red roses—and realized at once that she had been in her sister's room trying on dresses from that armoire. This one was too large for her undeveloped figure. The bright scarlet of the roses made the dress look like a stage costume in this depressing room.

"What's that you have on?" Madame asked, squinting toward the door.

Yvonne pouted. "You said I could wear Sylvie's dresses."

"Not until I make them over for you. And I can tell you that one will never be right. You look like a girl from the streets!"

"But Sylvie wore it!"

"She was old enough to wear what she pleased. Until you can

buy your own clothes, young lady, you'll wear what I tell you."

"Yes, Maman."

"Inspector Damiot has something he wants to ask you."

The girl faced him, hands on her hips, smiling.

For a moment he wondered what would happen to this one. Would she, too, end in some dark alley?

"M'sieur?"

"It's only this, Mademoiselle . . ." Damiot paused, distracted by his thoughts. "Did your sister ever mention where she ate? Those nights when she didn't come home for dinner?"

"Where she ate?" Yvonne frowned, pretending to think.

"Perhaps the name of a restaurant? What she had to eat? Anything of that sort?"

"No, M'sieur Inspecteur. We never talked about such things."

"I've already told the inspector that Sylvie liked nothing but steaks. Every night, if we could have afforded it, she would have been happy to eat steak. Any kind of steak!"

"That was her favorite!" Yvonne exclaimed. "She never liked the stews Maman cooked or the *pot au feu* we have every Sunday. And she wouldn't eat fish or tripe. Nothing like that."

"Only steak?" Damiot frowned.

Nothing more to be learned here.

"She told me once," Yvonne continued, "that she had a friend who ate tripe *à la mode de Caen* all the time. Made her sick to look at it. She wouldn't touch tripe at home."

"Was this friend a man? Or another girl?"

"She didn't say."

"*Eh bien!*" He pushed himself to his feet, carefully escaping from the shaky chair. "I must be on my way."

"Let me get your coat." Madame Dumolin rose and followed him toward the door. "Do you know who killed her, M'sieur Inspecteur? Have you found the man?"

"No, Madame. We've not found him yet. We know nothing."

Damiot felt uncomfortable, out of place, as he entered the small white-and-gold shop with its glittering showcases. He glanced from chemise to corset to peignoir, black and pink and white with small golden bows. He hesitated near the entrance, careful not to stand too close to the nearest display case, waiting for one of the salesgirls to be free.

He knew they had noticed him come in from the street. All the salesgirls, as before, wore tailored gray uniforms with immaculate

white cuffs and collars. They were prettier than Sylvie Dumolin, although she might have looked quite attractive behind a counter, wearing a smart gray uniform in this diffused golden light. All three girls were busy. Their customers were older women, elegantly dressed, furred and jeweled.

Damiot closed his eyes. Each of these females must be wearing a different perfume. The smell made his stomach wrench.

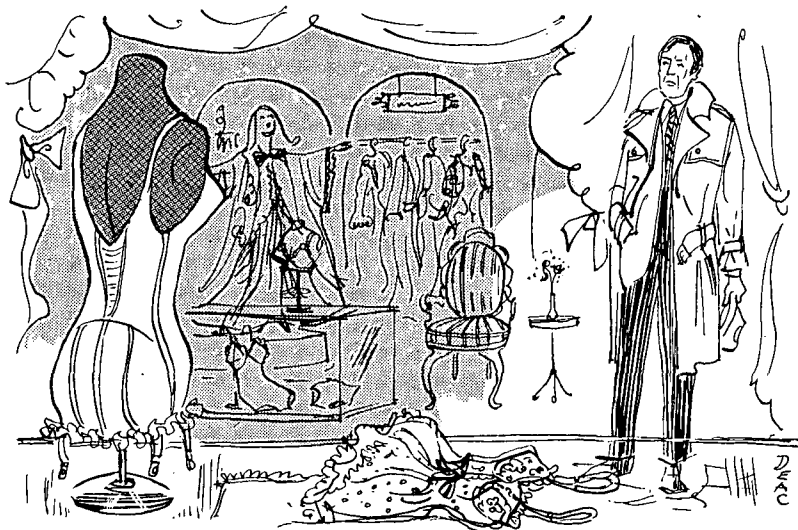
"M'sieur Inspecteur? It's you again!"

He opened his eyes to see the manager—a fiftyish blonde wearing a severe black dress with a string of pearls—coming from a side passage which he knew, from previous visits, led to her office. "I regret having to bother you, Madame."

"There's been no word in the papers about the case being solved." She kept her voice low, to prevent the customers overhearing. "So I've been expecting you back to ask more questions."

"One or two, perhaps."

"Come into my office." She led the way through the dim passage, into a stark-white cubicle containing a plain desk with two kitchen chairs and a row of metal files. Every inch of space was filled with cardboard boxes of merchandise. "Please . . ." She motioned



to the other chair as she sat at her desk, in a harsh glare of light from the ceiling. "What more can I tell you?"

He sank onto the chair, unbuttoning his damp topcoat, and dropped his soggy hat on the floor. "I would like to know where Sylvie Dumolin ate around here. Which restaurants? Her mother tells me she rarely came home for dinner."

"I've no idea where she might go, M'sieur. My staff seldom discuss such matters with me. We have such a turnover of salesgirls that I avoid getting involved with their personal affairs. I've no idea what they do when they leave here. Frankly, M'sieur, I'm not in-

terested in that at all," she told him.

"I understand . . . Would you permit me to ask your girls whether they ever heard Sylvie Dumolin mention any restaurants?"

"I'm afraid only two of them could be of help. The third girl is new. She replaced Sylvie. I'll send the others in so that you can question them privately." Madame rose gracefully from her desk.

He watched her disappear through the passage. Damn fine-looking woman, good figure for her age. He wondered if she wore one of those fancy corsets he had noticed in the shop.

Since he left the Dumolin apartment, something had been

troubling him. Several things he had been told were squirming around at the back of his mind. Sometimes such things rose to the surface, but other times they only sank into oblivion.

Madame Dumolin had said something, in passing, that touched a faint chord of suspicion. Or was it the daughter? Perhaps something he had noticed in the apartment?

He could only wait until whatever it was surfaced in his mind. That usually happened when he was thinking about something else.

"M'sieur Inspecteur?"

He looked around and saw the two salesgirls in the open doorway; one dark, the other blonde, looking timid and apprehensive in spite of their smart uniforms, clutching each other by the hand like schoolgirls. Amazing how people acted when they knew they were about to be questioned by the police, even when they were innocent.

Damiot smiled. "Come in! I want to ask you several more things about the Dumolin girl." He waited until they came closer. "Do you have any idea where she ate lunch in this neighborhood?"

They frowned, glancing at each other.

The dark girl was the first to answer. "I don't know where Syl-

vie ate. Never with us, anyway."

"She always hurried off by herself," the other girl said. "Every day."

"You didn't see where she went? Which direction?"

"No, M'sieur." The brunette again. "We never bothered to watch."

"What about after work? Where would she go for dinner? Her mother says she didn't come home every night."

Both girls shrugged.

The brunette spoke first. "Sylvie never talked about where she went. I've seen her, once or twice, going into a *cinéma*."

"Was she alone?"

"Always."

"Sylvie was in a hurry to leave here every evening." The blonde turned to her friend for confirmation. "We had an idea she went to the *cinéma* first, then afterward probably met a boyfriend for dinner."

Damiot realized that something was slowly surfacing in his memory. Perhaps if he continued talking it would come clear. "Her mother told me she was in a rush to leave home in the morning. Never took time for breakfast, drinking a cup of coffee while she dressed."

Both girls laughed, relaxing now.

"She was the last to get in every morning," the blonde answered. "And first to leave at night! Madame complained all the time."

Suddenly he remembered what it was that had been troubling him. "That dress with the roses!"

"What, M'sieur?"

"Did you ever see Sylvie Dumolin in a white dress with red roses all over it?"

"No, M'sieur." The brunette frowned. "We never knew what Sylvie wore under her coat before she changed into her uniform."

"As I told you," the blonde interrupted, "she was the last to arrive each morning. Never anyone in the dressing room with her."

"You don't wear your own clothes in the shop?"

"That is not permitted, M'sieur. Everybody wears the same. Madame furnishes our uniforms."

"Do you think Sylvie went to the *cinéma* to pick up men?" He studied their faces as they looked at each other and giggled. "Well?"

"I would not want to say that," the blonde answered.

The brunette added: "We have never seen Sylvie with a man."

"All right. That's what I wanted to know." He gestured with his hand, dismissing them. As they escaped through the door he got to

his feet, now ready to leave.

He had learned a little more. Madame Dumolin had said that her daughter bought a new dress every month; all the expensive clothes he had seen hanging in her armoire. Couldn't buy those on the salary she earned here, and she wasn't allowed to wear her new finery in the shop. So she hadn't flaunted her dresses in front of the other girls.

She must have bought them to attract men, strangers she picked up in *cinémas*. Or was there only one man? Some businessman she met for dinner after the *cinéma*?

Where? Close to that alley where she was killed? Was the Square Louvois their place of rendezvous? Perhaps the man lived in the neighborhood, or had his office there. An older man? Maybe they ate in that area every time they met.

Or did they meet here, near the lingerie shop? Have their dinner in the crowded Champs-Élysées area?

The Square Louvois was more discreet. They would be less conspicuous there—a man with a young girl wearing a white dress splashed with red roses . . .

Was he the friend who always ate tripe à la mode de Caen?

Damiot bowed, raising his hat toward Madame as he came out

from the dim passage and left the shop, escaping from the clinging perfume into the fresh smell of rain.

"You're certain you never saw this girl?"

The sharp-eyed waiter shook his head. "She never ate here."

Damiot slipped the photograph back into the pocket of his damp topcoat. He hesitated, glancing around the half-empty café, tempted to ask for a table and order dinner. The delicious smell of cooking from the kitchen was the most promising he had encountered so far tonight. No! Better check a few more places before stopping to eat.

"M'sieur Inspecteur?"

He realized that the waiter was eager to return to his customers. "Is there any restaurant in the neighborhood that serves tripe à la mode de Caen?"

"That is difficult to get in Paris these days, M'sieur." The waiter shrugged. "Unless, of course, you find a chef from Normandy."

"If you should hear of such a chef in this *arrondissement*, call me at the Préfecture. It's important."

"Certainly, M'sieur Inspecteur. I will ask around."

Damiot nodded toward the plump woman at the cashier's

desk as he turned toward the door.

"Any luck, M'sieur?" she asked.

"None." He opened the door, stepped out into the pouring rain, and continued down the unfamiliar street.

This was the fifth restaurant he had visited since the start of the dinner hour. As yet none of them had been crowded. People must be staying home because of the unpleasant weather.

He wished he were having dinner in a warm apartment, with his mistress or his wife. Before he left the office he had phoned both of them, explained that he would have to work tonight.

Olympe, as usual, had sounded genuinely disappointed. He knew that she would eat alone and watch television until she felt sleepy.

When he phoned home his wife had not seemed interested. She was accustomed to his excuses. At least twice a week, when he spent an evening with Olympe, he phoned to tell his wife that he would be working. Sophie, as always, would go to bed and read one of her silly novels until she fell asleep. He would find her, the book fallen to the floor and the lamp still lighted on the bed table.

Olympe and Sophie . . . The

leather sweatband inside his hat felt cold and damp against his forehead.

This evening's tour began when he left the Préfecture and took a taxi to the Square Louvois. He had checked a restaurant on the corner, showed them his picture of Sylvie Dumolin. No luck.

Leaving the Square, he had followed the same narrow street that she had walked in those final moments of her life. He paused to peer into the alley where her body had been found, but it was so dark that he could barely glimpse the wet cobblestones.

Shivering now under his topcoat, he turned into another street. His legs were getting tired.

He wondered what luck young Graudin was having in the Champs-Élysées area. Too many restaurants to cover in that *arrondissement*. He had given his assistant several copies of the dead girl's photograph and told him to show it in each restaurant, ask if anyone recognized her, find out if they served tripe à la mode de Caen. Graudin wasn't thirty yet. His legs would hold out longer.

Damiot continued on, through the driving rain, street after street. His stomach was growling. Another half hour and he would get some dinner.

Pausing at the corner, he found

himself facing a street of small shops shuttered for the night. Apartments were on the upper floors. There was a small neon sign in the middle of the block. Impossible to read its trembling blue letters through the driving rain from this distance, but it looked like a restaurant. As he drew closer to the shivering blue glow of light he was able to make out the neon words: AUBERGE NORMANDE.

They would, surely, have a chef from Normandy!

He pushed the carved wooden doors open and went inside. An enticing aroma greeted him. A truffled sauce *normande*? Maybe he would eat dinner here.

The place was like a country kitchen: blazing logs in a huge fireplace, copper pots and pans hanging from timbered walls and beamed ceiling, red-and-white checked curtains at the windows, with table linen to match. A dozen tables were occupied, more than in any of the other restaurants he had visited. Waiters were scurrying to and from the kitchen.

The cashier's desk was deserted, but Damiot saw her—gray-haired and wearing the customary black dress of her position—talking with a guest at a distant table as a smiling waiter came toward him.

"Good evening, M'sieur."

"Good evening." He brought out his badge. "Chief Inspector Damiot."

The waiter's smile did not falter but he lowered his voice. "How can I help you, M'sieur?"

"Your chef is from Normandy?"

"But of course!"

"Do you, by chance, serve tripe *à la mode de Caen*?"

"Certainly, M'sieur Inspecteur. The best in all Paris!"

"And is there one man who orders it every time he dines here?"

"Many of our guests come especially for the tripe. They always order it."

Damiot felt deflated. Of course! If tripe was a specialty of the house many people would eat it. Should he ask for a list of customers who always ordered the dish? He shoved the badge back into his pocket. What was the waiter saying?

"... although there's one man who seems to have stopped eating it."

"What's that?"

"One of our regulars. For the past year he has ordered tripe whenever he dines here. Claimed it was the best he ever tasted! Then, two weeks ago, he stopped. Said he never wanted to see tripe again!"

"Two weeks ago?"

"The chef was afraid something

had been wrong with the gentleman's last order, but he assured me it was excellent."

"Who is this man? His name!"

"M'sieur Chauland. I've never heard his first name."

"Was there a girl with him? All the time! Up to two weeks ago?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Did she always order a steak?"

The waiter looked startled. "How could you know that, M'sieur?"

"Tell me! Which night does this Chauland eat here?"

"At least twice a week. Usually Tuesday and Thursday."

"Tuesday and— This is Thursday!"

"M'sieur Chauland is eating dinner now."

"Which table?"

The waiter turned and gestured discreetly toward a heavyset man sitting alone at a table in an alcove. "There won't be any trouble?"

Damiot didn't answer as he crossed the dining room toward the alcove. He saw that Chauland appeared to be in his forties. He had thinning brown hair, carefully brushed, round face behind spectacles; eating with appetite, napkin tucked under his chin.

Coming closer, he saw that Chauland was eating a filet of sole. The detective removed his

hat as he reached the alcove.

Chauland sensed his presence and looked up.

"May I join you, Monsieur Chauland?"

"Well, I . . ."

Damiot sat at the table, facing him, and brought the photograph from his pocket.

The spectacles were staring at him now.

"Who are you?" Chauland asked.

"Chief Inspector Damiot." He held the photograph out, across the table. "Why did you kill her?"

"She was . . . blackmailing me." He set his fork down, carefully, on the plate. "It became impossible. I couldn't pay her any more."

Damiot saw that his eyes, behind the spectacles, had filled with tears. "How did you meet this girl?"

"At the *cinéma*. More than a year ago."

"You live near here?"

"No, but my office is nearby. We always met, several times each week, in the Square Louvois.

Walked over here to have dinner."

"Why was she blackmailing you?"

"Because . . ." Chauland hesitated. "She was pregnant. Threatened to tell my wife. I'd given her money every week to live on. She had no job and no family. I was happy to help her! But when she said she was pregnant I lost my head. My wife and I have three children . . ."

Damiot frowned. For a moment, thinking of his own wife and mistress, Sophie and Olympe, he felt a wave of compassion for this man. "There was an autopsy, Monsieur. This girl—Sylvie Dumolin—was not pregnant."

"Then it was for nothing! What I did . . . How did you find me?"

"Your fondness for tripe à la mode de Caen."

Chauland stared at the unfinished fish on his plate. "I had tripe the night she . . . died. But I—I've never been able to eat tripe since! Not in two weeks . . ."

"The waiter told me. That's how I knew you were the one."



It may be presumed that the final results will not include Super-simulated Bloodstains for Make-believe Murder.

Mail Order



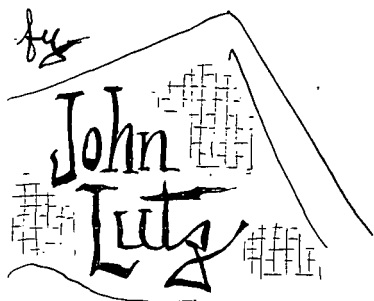
Angela lay quite still. I watched her sleep. About her blonde-streaked locks wound the black lace contraption that was supposed to protect her hairdo as she slept. An elastic chin strap was relentlessly working to keep her double chin from growing. Dark eyeshades covered the upper part of her face to keep the morning sun from waking her prematurely.

I knew that beneath the special Thermo-weave blanket was an intricately designed sleeping bra the purpose of which was to preserve her bosomy uplift. At the foot of the bed a wire framework beneath the covers lifted them tentlike eighteen inches above the mattress to prevent them from causing pressure on the toes that would lead to ingrown toenails and later

serious foot problems. Lying open across Angela's softly heaving chest was the latest Happy House mail-order catalog, its colorful pages riffing gently in the soft breeze from the air-conditioning vent near the bed.

Angela was a mail-order maniac. Almost every day some item featured in one of dozens of catalogs we regularly received would find its way into our mailbox or onto our front porch, while the checking account struggled for survival.

I had talked to her, explained



to her, argued violently with her. What was the use? Like many other women, her mail-order addiction was too strong for her. The miniature watermelon plants, the inflatable picnic plates, the battery-heated ice cream scoops and countless similar mail-order items continued to pour into our household. Angela was incurable and I was slowly being driven mad.

The electric scent dispenser that emitted a pleasant-smelling anti-septic spray every fifteen minutes hissed at me from my dresser as I bent down to lift the Happy House catalog from Angela's sleeping form. Through some cross-up in the mail due to our having moved three times during the past two and a half years, this Happy House catalog that had arrived two weeks ago was the only one we'd received during that time.

I don't know if you've ever seen what happens when you haven't ordered from one of these catalogs for a long time, but they become quite adamant that you should continue to buy from them. This one contained a particularly strong though typical warning printed on the back cover with our family name typed in to make it seem more personal—or more ominous.

"Final warning:" it was very officially headed. "It comes to our attention, Mr. and Mrs. Crane, that you haven't ordered from our catalog for the past two years. This is to warn you that we must have an order of at least five dollars from the Crane family NOW in order to maintain your account. Remember, Mr. and Mrs. Crane, this is your last chance—it's up to you!"

As I was lifting the catalog lightly, the doorbell rang, and I lowered the open pages again onto Angela and crossed the room to climb into my pants. Almost midnight, I noticed with a glance at the imported family-crest clock as I tried to locate my slippers. I didn't know who could be on the porch, but I hoped they'd refrain from punching the doorbell again before I could reach the door. Even through her special sleep-aid earplugs the sound of the loud bell might wake Angela. As I straightened and buckled my belt I almost struck my head on the portable TV aerial attachment that allowed clear, free reception in any weather, then I hurried from the bedroom and down the hall to the front door, my slipper soles padding noisily across the carpet.

Just as I reached the foyer the bell clanged again, and I angrily flipped the night latch and opened the door.

They were in uniform. One of them carried a flashlight that he shone onto a little note pad as if double-checking the address.

"Mr. Harold Crane?" the tall one asked. He was trim and broad-shouldered, with clean, anonymous features and short-cropped hair. His partner with the flashlight was much shorter,

heavyset, with a blank moon face and long blond hair that stuck out from beneath his high-peaked black uniform cap. Their uniforms were completely black; they wore gloves and black leather jackets with insignia on the shoulders.

"I'm he," I said, rubbing my eyes. I'd been sleeping on the sofa before going into the bedroom and my mind was still sluggish.

"Come with us, please," the taller man said in a clipped, pleasant voice.

In the moonlight I saw the initials P.D. on the short man's shoulder patch. "Are you police . . . ? Come with you . . . ?"

Both men took me gently by the upper arms and I was led toward a small, dark-colored van parked at the curb in front of my lawn.

"Just cooperate, please," the round-faced blond one said, lagging behind for a moment to close the front door softly behind us.

"Now, wait a minute . . . !" But the van doors were open and I was pushed gently inside. The two men climbed in behind me and closed the doors. The tall one tapped on a partition with his gloved knuckles and the van pulled away.

"I'm not even dressed!" I objected. I was wearing only my pants, slippers and pajama top.

Neither man answered me, or even looked directly at me, only sat on either side of me on the low bench as the van sped through the dark streets.

We drove for almost an hour, and gradually, my eyes became accustomed to the dim light in the van. I studied the uniform of the man on my left. He wore two shoulder patches on his black leather jacket, one of them a red circle with the yellow P.D. initials that I'd noticed earlier, and below the circle a blue triangular patch containing a white cloud and the initials H.H. I studied the black square-toed boots, the brass stud-work designs on their glossy outer sides. I didn't have to be told that the P.D. on the patches didn't stand for "Police Department" as had originally run through my sleep-filled mind. I wasn't sleepy now.

"A kidnapping?" I asked incredulously. "You must have the wrong victim."

No answer.

"You'll find out," I said. "It's a mistake . . ."

"No mistake, Mr. Crane," the tall one said without looking at me.

The van suddenly braked to a smooth halt.

I could hear the crunching of footsteps on gravel as the driver

got out and walked to the rear of the van. The van was opened and I was led quickly into what looked like a motel room, though in the darkness it was hard to tell. The closing of the room's door cut short the high trilling of crickets. The van driver, whose features I had never clearly seen, stayed outside.

The inside of the room was neat and impersonal, clean and modern with a small kitchenette. I was led to the kitchenette table and both men forced me down into a chair. The tall one sat opposite me across the small table while the pudgy blond one remained standing uncomfortably close to me.

"I'm Walter," the tall man said. "My partner's name is Martin."

"And you're not police," I said, braving it out despite my fear. "Just who the hell are you?"

"Police . . . ?" Walter arched an eyebrow quizzically at me from across the table. "Oh, yes, the P.D. on our shoulder patches. That stands for 'Persuasion Department,' Mr. Crane. We're from Happy House."

"Happy House? The mail-order company?"

Walter nodded with a smile. There would have been a suavity about him but for the muscularity that lurked beneath the shoulders

of his leather uniform jacket. "We're one of the biggest in the country."

"In the world," Martin corrected beside me.

"This is absurd!" I said with a nervous laugh that sounded forced.

Martin pulled a large suitcase from beneath the table and opened it on the floor.

"Our records show it's been almost two years since your last order, Mr. Crane," Walter said solemnly.

"Actually it's my wife . . ."

Walter raised a large, silencing hand. "Didn't you receive our final warning notice?"

"Warning . . . ?"

"Concerning the infrequency of your orders."

"He knows what you're talking about," Martin said impatiently.

"Yes," Walter agreed, "I think he does. What's been the problem, Mr. Crane?"

"No problem, really . . ."

"But a problem to Happy House, Mr. Crane," Walter politely pointed out. "You see, our object is for our organization and our customers to be happy with our merchandise. And if we don't sell to our customers that's not possible, is it?"

"Put that way, no . . ."

"Put simply," Walter said,

"since Happy House has to make a profit through volume to be able to keep on offering quality merchandise at bargain prices, in a way each customer's happiness is directly related to each other customer's continuing willingness to order from us."

"In a sense, I suppose that's true . . ."

"Here, Mr. Crane." Walter placed a long sheet of finely typed white paper on the table before me.

I stared at him. "What's that?"

"An order blank," he answered.

"Since you've been hesitant to order from our catalog," Martin said, "we thought you might be more enthusiastic if we showed you the actual merchandise." From the suitcase on the floor he drew a flat red plaster plaque and set it on the table.

"What is it?" I asked, looking at the black sticklike symbols on the plaque.

"Why, it's your name, Mr. Crane. Your name in Japanese. A real conversation piece."

"Perhaps you missed it in our catalog," Walter said. "Only nine ninety-nine."

"No, thanks," I said, and I didn't even see Walter's gloved hand until the backs of the knuckles struck me on the jaw. I rose half out of my chair in rage only

to be forced back down by the unbelievable pain of Martin digging his fingers skillfully into jangling nerve endings in the side of my neck.

"Of course you don't *have* to order the plaque," Walter said, smiling and laying a ball-point pen before me.

I picked up the pen and checked the tiny box alongside the plaque's description on the order form. Martin's paralyzing grip on my neck was immediately loosened.

Martin bent again over the large suitcase and came up with a coiled red wire with tiny brass clips on each end. "Everyone needs one of these," he said.

"I bought the plaque with my name in Japanese," I pleaded.

Walter smiled at me and began to pound his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

"I'll take it," I said, "whatever it is."

"It's a Recepto-booster," Martin explained. "You hook one clamp onto the aerial of your transistor radio, the other end you clamp onto your ear. Your entire body becomes a huge antenna for your portable radio."

"Only five ninety-nine," Walter said. "Two for ten dollars."

"I'll take two," I said, checking the appropriate box on the order

form—but not any too happily.

"I thought you'd be receptive to that." Walter smiled.

A gigantic red-handled scissors with one saw-toothed blade was placed on the table next. "Our Jumbo Magi-coated Lifetime All Purpose Garden Shears," Martin said. "The deluxe chrome-plated model. You can cut or saw, trim grass or hedges, snip through inch-thick branches. Never needs sharpening. Twenty-nine ninety-nine."

"Twenty-nine ninety-nine!"

Walter appeared hurt. "It's made of quality steel, Mr. Crane." The back of his hand lashed across my cheek and I was the one who was hurt. This time I did not try to rise. I checked the order form.

The gigantic scissors was followed by inflatable rubber shoes over three feet long for walking on lake surfaces, an electric sinus mask, a urinal-shaped stein bearing the words "For The World's Biggest Beer Drinker," tiny battery-operated windshield wipers for eyeglasses, fingertip hot pads for eating toast . . . I decided I needed them all.

"Excellent," Walter said, smiling beneath his black uniform cap. "This will make the organization happy, and since we're part of the organization we'll be happy. And you, Mr. Crane, as one of our reg-

ular customers back in the fold; you'll be happier too."

I didn't feel happy at all, and indignation again began to seep through my fear.

"He doesn't look happy," Martin said, but Walter ignored him.

"Mr. Crane, I'm sure you'll feel better after you sign to make the order legal and binding," Walter said, motioning with a curt nod toward the ball-point pen.

"Better than if he doesn't sign," Martin remarked.

"But he will sign," Walter said firmly.

The sureness in his voice brought up the anger in me. "I won't sign anything," I said. "This is preposterous!"

"What about this?" Walter said, and with the flash of a silver blade severed the tip of the little finger of my left hand.

I stared down with disbelief and remoteness, as if it were someone else's hand on the table.

"This is our imported Hunter's Hacha-knife," Walter was saying, holding up the broad-bladed gleaming instrument. "It can be used for anything from scaling fish to cutting firewood." He wiped the blade with a white handkerchief, slipped the Hacha-knife back beneath his jacket and tossed the handkerchief over my finger. Martin picked up the fingertip it-

self and dropped it into a small plastic bag as if it were something precious to him. He poked it into a zippered jacket pocket.

I held the wadded handkerchief about my left hand, feeling the dull throb that surprisingly took the place of pain. There was also surprisingly little blood.

"I'm sure Mr. Crane will sign the order form now," Walter said, picking up the pen and holding it toward me.

I signed.

"Now, how much money do you propose to put down?" Walter asked, and I felt Martin remove my wallet from my hip pocket. I only sat staring at Walter, trying to believe what had happened.

"Twenty-seven dollars," Martin said, returning my empty wallet to my pocket.

Walter turned the signed order form toward him and entered the twenty-seven dollars against the \$210.90 that I owed.

Martin gathered all the merchandise I'd purchased and dumped it back into the suitcase.

"So you can carry everything, we'll throw in as a bonus our Traveler's Pal crushproof suitcase," Walter said.

As I stared at him blankly I heard myself thank him—I actually thanked him!

"I'm sure Mr. Crane will be a satisfied, regular customer we can count on," Walter said. "I'm sure we can expect an order from him . . . oh, let's say at least three times a year."

"At the very least," Martin agreed, helping me to my feet.

The ride home in the van was a replay of the first ride, and it seemed like only seconds had passed when I was left standing before my house with my heavily laden Traveler's Pal suitcase. Gripping the wadded handkerchief in place tightly with the fingers of my left hand, I watched the twin taillights of the van draw together and disappear as they turned a distant dark corner.

As I walked up the sidewalk past the trimmed hedges toward my front door I tried to absorb what had happened, to turn it some way in my mind so I could understand it. Had it really happened? Had it been a dream, or somebody's idea of a bloody, macabre joke? Or had it been just what it seemed—the unprovable, ultimate hard sell?

I knew I'd never find out for

sure, and that whether or not Walter and Martin had really been from Happy House, the mail-order company could expect my regular orders for the rest of my life.

The Traveler's Pal suitcase heavy in my right hand, I entered the house and trudged into the bedroom, a deep ache beginning to throb up my left arm.

There was Angela, still sleeping in blissful unawareness with her eyeshades and sleep-aid earplugs. The Happy House catalog was lying on her chest where I'd left it, the pages riffling gently in the soft breeze from the air-conditioning vent.

Angela didn't stir as I dropped the suitcase on the floor and the latches sprang open to reveal the assortment of inane merchandise I'd bought. The loud sob that broke from my throat startled me as I stared down at the contents of the suitcase. It was all so useless—all of it!

Except for the Jumbo Magicoated Lifetime All Purpose Garden Shears. Oh, I had a use for them!



Some package deals may become inoperative almost before the ink is dry.



It must have been the whisper of fate that sent me to the old man's apartment on this particular morning. I'd not been there since his 74th birthday five months earlier, and during the intervening time I'd chatted with him on the phone just once. So much for filial solicitude. Yet when I woke on this particular morning something told me to pay the old man an unannounced visit.

As soon as he opened the door I knew I'd arrived barely in time to abort some scandalous misadventure. His sparse white hair was tinted black, as were the shaggy eyebrows and Teddy Roosevelt moustache. The odd

glint in his watery blue eyes was ample evidence that contact lenses were doubling for the usual horn rims. His dentures were in his mouth for a change, enormously white. He was wearing a yellow suede jacket with angle-slash pockets—the kind you'd find in a Lew Magram catalog—a floral-stripe shirt open at the wattled neck, flared white ducks and brown-thonged sandals. Attached to his left wrist by a wide silver bracelet was a huge chronometer that obviously told not only the time of day but the day of the week, the month of the year, the year of the century, possibly with moon phases, wind velocity and

compass points as a clincher. All in all, the old man resembled nothing so much as a dissolute comedian.

"Holy mackerel, Pop," I said. "What the devil are you up to?"

"None of your damned business," he replied, the teeth clicking like castanets. "Why don't you turn around and go back where you came from?"

"A fine way to greet your one and only son. What have you done—joined a senior citizens' drama club?"

"Don't try to be funny, Wes," he said, actually attempting to block my way into the apartment.

"If it's votes for funny, Pop, you look like a winner."

"I don't have time to stand around and argue. I've got a train to catch."

"Where to?"

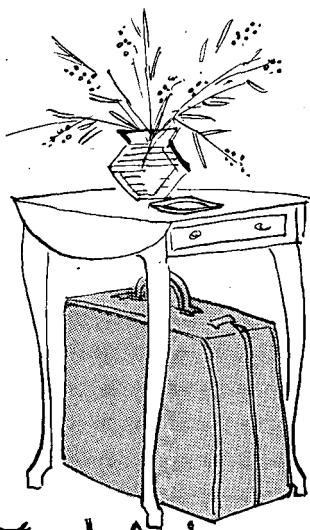
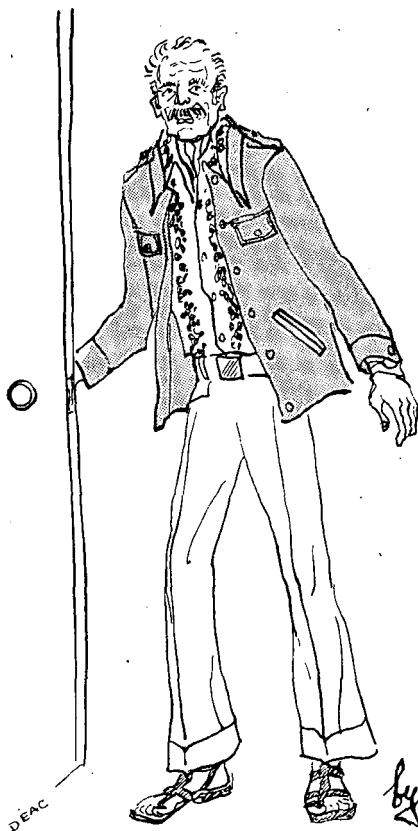
"Orange, if you must know."

"New Jersey?"

"Connecticut."

"Why so sly, Pop?"

"I like to preserve a certain pri-



by Frank Sisk

vacy. I thought you were the taxi. Otherwise I'd never opened the damned door."

At this moment I spotted the traveling bag half under the foyer table. It was a black-leather affair, glossy with newness, large enough to hold a month's supply of clothes.

"By the looks of the luggage," I remarked, "you seem to be planning an extended visit to Orange."

"Maybe and maybe not," he snapped.

"Meaning what?"

"Depends on the lady."

"Oh, so there's a lady in the offing. You old rascal, you."

He began to grin in spite of himself, the big teeth and the straggly black moustache making the grin both unctuous and repellent. "I'm not completely over the hill yet," he said with a foxy wink.

"You could have fooled me, Pop."

"Button your sassy lip and take a gander at something real nice." He reached inside one of the angle-slash pockets and brought forth his checkbook. It fell open to a place where he'd tucked a snapshot and a powder-blue envelope. "Feast your quidnunc peepers on that," he said, proffering the snapshot.

It was a color print depicting a

lady in a red sweater and a blue skirt leaning against a dark tree trunk. A hayfield wavered fuzzily in the background. The camera lens had caught the lady at close range from the hips up and what it had caught was prime grade: straitish waist, generous bosom, piquant face, wavy chestnut-colored hair.

Age? Thirty-five. Forty at most.

There was something theatrical about the pose, something faintly familiar about the face.

Still studying the snapshot, I said, "Pop, you've got one hell of a lot of ambition. Who is this fetching babe?"

"Possibly your future step-mother," he said.

"I notice from the setting she's a real country type. Rakes the meadows sweet with hay."

"You might say that."

"She looks younger than Barbara."

"Barbara's your business, son. Thisbe's mine."

"Thisbe?" I hacked out a dry laugh. "That's actually her name?"

"What's wrong with it? It goes back to mythology."

"So does Methuselah. Which is what she probably calls you when you're not around."

"She hasn't met me yet," he said. "In the flesh."

"My mind boggles at the pros-

pect," I offered whimsically.

The old man began to fume just as the intramural phone emitted its peculiar buzz. This phone hangs from a bracket above the foyer table. I took possession of it before the old man could react.

"Hello," I said.

"Mr. Dowling?" asked Herbert the doorman.

"This is the younger Mr. Dowling, Herb."

"There's a cab down here for your father, sir."

"Slip the driver two bucks and send him away. I'll reimburse you on the way out."

"As you say, sir."

The old man was sorely vexed. "I should have whaled the living tar out of you when you were smaller," he yelled.

"Keep your shirt on, Pop. I'll drive you to the station myself if you'll release a few facts first."

"Tommyrot!"

"Since you and Thisbe haven't met yet—at least in the flesh, as you so delicately phrased it—am I to assume you are primarily pen pals, pure and simple?"

"Not so pure and not so simple," he cackled.

"You're a dirty old persifleur, Pop. Here. Do you want this snapshot back?"

He accepted it with alacrity. As he was restoring it to its special

place among the pages of his checkbook, behind the powder-blue envelope, I made my next move. There are some who might call it caddish. I suppose a small share of cad's blood runs through my veins. Anyway, this caddish quick-fingered move gained me control of that powder-blue envelope.

"*Give that back!*" the old man bellowed.

"Take it easy, Pop."

"*I'll disinherit you!*"

"Calm yourself, Pop."

"*I'll disown you!*"

"Alas."

"*I'll disembowel you!*"

"Stow your disgusting fantasies, Pop, and let me examine this item in peace."

"*I'll discredit you at home and abroad!*"

The envelope was typed. There was no return address but it was postmarked New Haven (of which Orange is a suburb) four days earlier and was directed to *Mr. Wesley Cavalier Dowling*, sans Senior. I wondered how long ago the old man had decided that Cavalier was preferable as a middle name over the Charles we'd held mutually since my christening, but I didn't exercise the point at this time. Instead, I slipped the contents from the envelope, a single sheet of powder-blue note paper

folded, and unfolded it for perusal. The writing had been done with a fine-pointed pen in an ink not much bluer than the paper itself, which made it difficult to read in the poor light of the foyer. Literally elbowing my way past the ranting old man, I entered the livingroom and walked to the tall windows overlooking Riverside Park and the Hudson.

Even with the aid of the bright morning light the writing was strangely faint and spidery—for good reason, as we shall soon see. I duplicate the letter from memory.

My dear Cavalier,

So you are finally going to pay a visit to my little farm. I am delighted. You should have no trouble finding it. Once you get on Fernwood Road, you can ask just about anybody where the Widow Gluck's place is and they will give you directions. It's a darling little green house with white trim on the left side of the street as you come in from the Post Road. I think you will fall in love with it. So don't forget to bring your checkbook.

Expectantly yours,

Thisbe

P.S. My name is on the RFD mailbox.

"Thisbe Gluck," I said with a reproachful look at the old man.

"I'll thank you to return that letter," he said.

"Alias the Widow of Fernwood Road. Don't you find that a bit thick, Pop?"

"I can do without further commentary from you, Wes."

"One more thing, Cavalier. What's all this about your checkbook?"

"That's between Thisbe and me."

"Obviously. What's the size of the bite?"

"I've answered your last question. Now, damn it, give me back that letter and take me to Penn Station."

"Ah, well, if you insist on making a superannuated ass of yourself, there's not much I can do to stop you." As I folded the letter preparatory to sliding it into its envelope, my eyes glancingly bore witness to a phenomenon. Doubting what I'd seemed to have seen, I quickly unfolded the letter again and, yes, even as I stared at it wide-eyed the spidery words continued to disappear. In another 30 seconds the paper was blank.

"What's the matter?" the old man asked.

"Look for yourself," I said, handing him letter and envelope.

Contact lenses or not, he saw immediately what had happened.

"What does it mean?" he asked,

goggling at the blank sheet of stationery.

"It means Widow Gluck used some sort of vanishing ink. That's what it means. The chemical process was probably accelerated by exposure to the bright morning sun."

"What the hell would she do a thing like that for?"

"Don't be obtuse, Pop. She wanted to erase the record. Do you have any other such, uh, billets-doux around?"

In a daze he crossed the room to the mantelpiece. Atop it squatted an antique ormolu clock. Opening the drawer in the clock's base, he took out a thin sheaf of powder-blue envelopes held together by an elastic band and turned it over to me with a shrug of resignation.

None of the envelopes had a return address. All bore a New Haven postmark. The earliest was dated three months ago, the most recent only 10 days back. As I could have predicted, the enclosures were as blank as a puddle of water.

One by one I handed the wordless pieces of paper over to the old man. Shuffling them, he said, "I still don't get it, Wes."

"She's set up some sort of a trap, Pop. A sinister one, I'm afraid. I want you to come out to

my place for a visit. We can boot Thisbe Gluck on the way."

I'll say this for the old man, before we left he insisted on transforming himself back to his grandfatherly image—presumably out of deference to Barbara and the kids.

En route to Fairfield, where I live, and which is less than a 30-minute drive to Orange, the old man confessed all. He had discovered Thisbe Gluck through the classified-advertising columns—*Well-off Widow Wants Companionship; Gentleman of Means Seeks Mate*—of a magazine whose name I won't promote here. In the course of their brief and *disappearing* correspondence Mrs. Gluck disclosed that she was owner of a house in good condition with 20 acres of farmland adjoining. Assessed value: \$65,000; market value: \$100,000 at least; but the property carried a \$10,000 mortgage which she was having the devil's own time in paying off, all because of a cessation of dividends from her late husband's unbusinesslike investments. She was already several months in arrears on the mortgage payments and the bank was threatening foreclosure. Unless she found money soon she would lose everything. It was the desperateness of the situ-

ation that had finally impelled her to advertise in said magazine.

As the old man revealed the facts about himself, no doubt embellished, the Widow of Fernwood Road was suddenly struck by what she girlishly described as "a wild and romantic idea." Why didn't Wesley Cavalier Dowling pay her a visit and look things over—her mortgaged property and her unmortgaged self? (With this letter of invitation, according to the old man, she enclosed the snapshot.)

In a subsequent letter, if I understand the scenario correctly, the Widow suggested that certain options might be open to the Cavalier. If he liked the looks of the farm, for instance, she could be persuaded to offer him half interest in it for the \$10,000 required to retire the mortgage. If he also liked her own looks (and she his), they could possibly solidify the deal by adding marriage.

"Quite a con," I said.

"I guess I wasn't using the old noggin," the old man said.

"Mind if I look at that snapshot again?"

"What snapshot?"

"The one tucked away in your checkbook. As if you didn't know."

"I meant to throw it away."

"Like hell you did."

He finally passed the snapshot

over to me, albeit reluctantly.

Driving with one hand, I gave it a few quick glances. The third glance did the trick. No wonder the face and figure were faintly familiar. They belonged to that whilom mermaid of moviedom, Esther Williams, circa *Raw Wind in Eden*.

I began to chuckle. The chuckle became a laugh. The laugh grew into roaring laughter.

"What's so bloody funny?" the old man asked.

I didn't tell him. It would have been rubbing salt in the wound.

We arrived home shortly after noon. The two children, under Barbara's supervision, were stoking up the charcoal broiler in the back yard. Frankfurters, hamburgers, rolls and relish decorated the picnic table. Dropping the old man into the midst of this activity, I drew Barbara aside, rapidly reviewed the Thisbe Gluck theme and then took off.

My first stop was Bridgeport, where I paid a call on an old friend of mine who is a chemical engineer. My next stop was Milford, where I consumed a monsterburger and a strawberry cowshake in my car outside the garish emporium which featured these dietetic delicacies. My third stop was the town hall in Orange.

I informed a matronly blue-haired lady in the town clerk's office that I was seeking information about a piece of property on Fernwood Road.

"Who is the owner?" the lady asked.

"A Mrs. Gluck, I believe."

The blue-haired lady entered a vault at the back of the room from which she emerged several minutes later.

"There are no property owners named Gluck on Fernwood Road," she said.

"Are you quite certain?"

"Quite. However, there is a Thisbe Gluck living at one seven nine Fernwood who is taxed for an automobile."

"Who actually owns that property?"

"It belonged to the late Minnie Noyes. Her estate is still in probate."

I suppose I possess more than my portion of what Albert Einstein termed "a holy curiosity"—that is, a curiosity whose constant appeasement is an end in itself—which may help to explain why I found myself on this lovely summer day parked near an RFD mailbox bearing the name T. GLUCK in fat black letters. The large yard beyond the mailbox was unkempt—rough weeds and

wild plantain mingling with the foot-high grass. A path of sand and cinder led to the front door of the pale-green house. The house itself, of the saltbox school of design, was fairly tidy, although its white trim was peeling in places. On either side stretched flat scrubby acres, effectively isolating the place from its neighbors. I noticed a late-model Peugeot in the rutted dirt driveway.

I got from my car and walked along the 100 feet or so of path to the front door and used the tarnished brass knocker.

The face of the woman who opened the door convinced me, if I ever needed convincing, that Esther Williams was sane and well and still living in California with Fernando Lamas.

The woman in the doorway was fiftyish. Her dun-colored hair, cut a la pageboy, looked suspiciously like a wig. The flesh around her ferrety brown eyes was scalloped with many wrinkles. Two seams parenthesized a thin, pink-rouged mouth. She wore a white jersey and blue jeans with as much shape as a slat. She held a lighted cigarette between two fingers of her stringy right hand.

The wicked witch of Wookey, I thought.

I said, "I'm here to see Thisbe Gluck."

"That's my name," she said in the kind of gravelly voice made famous by Tallulah Bankhead.

"I'm Wesley Dowling," I said.

She multiplied her seams and wrinkles with a grotesque smile. "Oh dear me. Wesley Cavalier Dowling."

"Just call me Wes."

"I thought you preferred Cavalier."

"Cavalier rusticana might be more like it out here," I said, es- saying a geographical quip.

"Please come in," she said, stepping aside. "You're so much younger than I expected."

"I'm older than I look," I said, entering a gloomy hallway. "And I didn't forget my checkbook either."

"Oh, *that!*" She flapped a hand in deprecation. "I hope my letters didn't sound too mercenary. But my plight is not a pretty one."

Nor your person either, I mused.

Whatever the game, wedlock evidently wasn't a serious part of it. The shocking discrepancy between snapshot and actuality was enough to drain the last drop of romance from any man who wasn't totally blind. So the real gimmick had to be something else, something in all likelihood to do with the property, which she didn't own, the bait cut to appeal

to another of man's hereditary appetites—greed.

"Your plight," I said, following her along the hall to the door of a small sitting room, "touched me deeply, Thisbe. You don't object to my calling you Thisbe, do you?"

"Of course not. I already feel we're old friends, Wes. Would you like to sit down and take a little refreshment or would you prefer to inspect the place first?"

"You'll forgive me if I put business before pleasure. It's my Yankee upbringing."

My main reason for wanting an immediate tour of the premises was to make sure no confederate was lurking in the woodwork. We spent the next 25 minutes going from cellar to attic and over some of the ground close to the house. All other detail aside, two routine items came to my attention and I note them herewith only because they contributed to later developments.

The first item was a section of red garden hose coiled under the cellar stairs. The second item was a patch of mint cultivated behind the garage.

Back in the sitting room the Widow Gluck proposed a choice of refreshment—iced tea or hot; coffee ditto; beer, gin or bourbon.

"You've uttered the magic

word," I said. "Bourbon for me."

"I make a manly mint julep," she said, again displaying that grotesque smile.

"Then you must make me one, Thisbe."

She left the room, absenting herself for five minutes, and came back with two tall frosty glasses on a tray. She set the tray on a deal table near my right elbow and let me take my pick. I chose the glass closer to hand and she took the other and resumed her seat.

Sprigs of fresh green mint clung aromatically to the rim of the glass. A plastic straw probed the depths of the shaved ice.

"A major work of art," I said.

"I hope it hits the spot," she said.

The phrase triggered a moment of apprehension, but then I told myself that the Widow would certainly not doctor my drink until the trap was set and ready to be sprung. Yet reason also warned me to plan ahead for such an eventuality. Consequently, when my julep was half finished, I asked for more ice.

"I'm sort of a freak about ice," I explained. "I like a drink always chock-full."

"I sure can fix that up, Wes." She rose from her chair and reached for my glass.

I grabbed it from the tray and held it close to my chest. "I won't surrender this delicious potation even for a second," I said, smiling.

"Okay then." Her seamy face registering annoyance, she hurried from the room. I could hear her rattling around in the kitchen down the hallway. A few minutes later she reappeared with a glass pitcher filled with cracked ice.

"Thank you, Thisbe," I said, replenishing my glass.

"There's plenty more where that came from," she said hospitably and then she began to get down to business. "Since I wrote you last week, Wes, a most unexpected development has taken place in my life."

"Is that so?"

"With a little help I may now be able to extricate myself from the financial morass in which the late Mr. Gluck left me, without the necessity of a loveless marriage."

"I see," I said, taking a large swallow of the diluted drink.

"No offense intended, Wes," she hastened to add. "I find you most personable. Your letters brightened many a dark day. But I must confess that Cliff—my late hubby's name—I must confess his dear image still lingers fondly."

"I understand," I said, maintaining a straight face. "Now

about this unexpected development you mentioned."

"Fantastic as it seems, I've just inherited property in California."

"A few more legacies like that, Thisbe, and you'll be a real-estate pauper."

She issued an appreciative cackle. "Fortunately, the property out there isn't encumbered like the place here. It's completely free and clear. Even the taxes are paid up to the end of the fiscal year."

"Well, congratulations."

"They may not be in order yet, Wes."

Ah, here's the hooker, I thought. "Why not?" I asked.

"I'll try to explain."

Her explanation had fewer flaws than most other fiction. To give me an idea of the California property's value, the weird Widow described it as consisting of a large Spanish-Mission style house, a swimming pool, a tennis court, a putting green and a three-car garage. Until her recent demise the owner of this mortgageless estate was one Auntie Jolie. And who was Auntie Jolie? Well, she was the one and only sister of Thisbe Gluck's long-departed and much-lamented mother; that's who Auntie Jolie was. She was also the one and only wife of dear old Uncle

Barney, a man whose special attributes, as outlined by T. G., placed him among the minor movie moguls of his era. Upon giving up the ghost in concert with most of the major studios, Uncle Barney bequeathed to his deserving relict the free-and-clear California enclave along with a comfortable annuity, but this annuity, as often happens, expired with Auntie Jolie.

"So you see, Wes," the Widow concluded, "I now have a considerable asset but no ready cash."

"Perhaps that can be remedied," I said, assembling an expression of Yankee shrewdness.

"Do you really think so?" She nearly clapped her hands with glee. "I'd welcome your advice, Wes."

"Let's review the situation over another of these excellent drinks," I said, smacking my lips like a man with bird in hand and two in the bush.

Over the refills we played the game of Let's Pretend and I let her think that she was playing it better than I. I pretended, for instance, to be trying to find a solution to her financial problem. She pretended to be following my ideas with hope and innocence while actually leading me adroitly down the garden path.

The package I finally sold her

was of course precisely what she had planned to buy from the beggining. In short, this poor widow, seemingly without an iota of business wit, permitted herself to be hoodwinked by a crafty Yankee cavalier up to that point where, figuratively speaking, she had his belly over a barrel and his thumbs tied to his toes.

The contents of the package:

I made out a check to Thisbe Gluck for \$15,000. In return she wrote out, more or less at my dictation, an agreement to employ \$10,000 of said sum in immediate retirement of the mortgage outstanding against the Fernwood Road property and thereafter she would transfer title to this property, free and clear of encumbrance, to Wesley C. Dowling.

What I *appeared* to have done was to "steal" for \$15,000 a piece of real estate that would readily bring \$100,000 on the open market. What Thisbe *appeared* to have done was to accede to this "forced" sale in order to acquire \$5,000 of working capital that would take her to California and see her through negotiations for the disposal of Auntie Jolie's property which, if one were to believe it existed, should yield at least a quarter of a million.

Which proves how deceiving appearances can be.

As the check and agreement changed hands I donned my Yankee-trader expression again and said, "We've overlooked one trifling detail, Thisbe. The deed."

"What deed, Wes?"

"The deed to this property. To make sure everything is in order, I'd like to look at a copy."

"Of course you would. But I keep my copy in a safe-deposit box and—" she glanced at her wristwatch "—it's already after four and the bank is closed."

"In that case let's phone the town hall so that I can verify—"

"Our quaint town hall also closes at four, Wes, but you may verify everything tomorrow morning."

"I'm afraid I've made no arrangements to stay in town overnight."

"You may stay right here—in this house. There's plenty of room. And I know you'll conduct yourself," she added, vulgarly arching her eyebrows, "as a perfect gentleman."

"Well, thanks," I said.

Our glasses were empty again. Thisbe rose and set them on the tray.

"I feel we deserve a drink of celebration," she said, her abrasive voice striking a convivial note.

"Corking idea. Or should I say uncorking?"

She departed with a gargoyle grin.

This is it, I told myself. Unless I've badly misjudged T. G., the julep coming up should be jumping with chloral hydrate or something similarly debilitating.

As soon as she returned I caught a clue. The glasses on the tray were different from those we'd been using. Around each rim ran a fine whorled line, whereas the others had been plain. Against the frost rim this fine line was practically invisible to the naked eye, but my own naked eye has always been bothersomely perceptive—sufficiently so in this instance to detect that the line on the glass the lady handed (not offered) to me was red while the line on the one she retained was black.

Seating herself, Thisbe said, "To an unforgettable afternoon," and raised the glass to forehead level.

Following suit, I said, "May the evening be equally memorable."

Chortling, she took a dainty sip.

I did likewise and then said, "Why, Thisbe, I do believe you've shorted me on the mint."

"Sorry, Wes, but I ran out of it."

"There's a lovely patch behind the garage. May I dash out and cut a few sprigs?"

Her ferrety eyes seemed to

sharpen with suspicion. She looked quickly at my glass, perhaps wondering what I'd do with the contents if I took it from the room.

"I'll get you the mint," she finally said. "After all, what's a hostess for?" Setting her glass back on the tray, she went from the room rather in a hurry.

In a moment the screen door off the kitchen slapped shut. In another moment I was operating like a bartender at an Elk's clam-bake. I emptied Thisbe's glass into the half-filled pitcher of ice. I refilled it with the contents of my own glass. I set it back on the tray directly over its moist imprint. Then I poured myself a tall one from the pitcher.

Presently mine hostess entered with a white saucer brimming with green mint. Giving a plump sprig an aroma-releasing twist, she dropped it into my julep, and I believe her eyes noted the fine red whorl at the same time.

"Ice and mint," she said, taking up her own glass again and sitting down. "You're a real finicky one, aren't you, Wes?"

"That's probably why I never remarried," I said. "Well, thanks for your patience, Thisbe." I took an enormous swallow. "Mmmm!"

"Is it all right now?"

"Out of this world," I said

then, again drinking heartily.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said, observing me with narrowed eyes, her own drink untasted still.

I took a third swallow and said, "I think these things are starting to get to me, Thisbe," and then I yawned and then I yawned again and made an attempt to set the glass on the deal table but couldn't get it up over the edge and it slid from my suddenly limp hand and landed with a muffled thud on the hooked rug at my feet. Taking a long shuddering inhalation, I closed my eyes.

Stillness. One, two, three, four, five, six seconds of stillness. Then movement. Behind my eyelids I was acutely aware of movement toward the door, out of the room, along the hall. I heard the front door open and close, heard the crunch of sand and cinder underfoot.

Opening my eyes, I turned my head toward the front window behind me. Through the lace curtains I saw T. G. getting into the driver's seat of my parked car. I'd left the key in the ignition, so she had no trouble starting it. She backed it to the driveway entrance and then drove it in, bringing it to a stop only a hairbreadth from the Peugeot's rear. Getting out, she disappeared toward the back of the house.

I sat in the chair and listened. Sounds began to work up from somewhere underneath the chair, from the cellar—sounds of shuffling and dragging.

I got up and took a position near the side window, using the curtain as concealment, in order to have a better view of the driveway. T. G. soon hove into sight, carrying a coil of red garden hose. Going to the passenger side of my car, she opened the door, dropped the hose on the seat, slammed the door and went back toward the back of the house. The screen door squealed and snapped shut.

I was once more affecting insensibility in the chair when T. G. entered the sitting room.

I heard a rattle of ice.

"Ah, a real manly julep," T. G. said in a voice now a good octave lower than the one she'd been using.

I risked opening my eyes a micrometer.

T. G. was standing in profile, head thrown back, draining the dregs of her drink with the thirsty abandon of a steamfitter—and even as I watched, slit-eyed, the potion took firm hold. T. G. hardly had time to deposit the empty glass on the tray before a marvelous vertigo whirled her once around and sent her pitching

head foremost to the rug on the floor. The force of the impact dislodged the dun-colored wig. With eyes wide open I stood up and approached the fallen figure. A most cursory examination was enough to convince me that she, the Widow of Fernwood Road, was actually a *he*—yes, a man, a grizzled old man, a bald old man, a bad old man, a murderous old man.

It was well after midnight before the state and local police let me go home. The capture of Barney Gluck—for such was his name—answered a number of questions which had been raised during the past year in connection with the deaths of four elderly men. In each case the cause of death had been tentatively ascribed to suicide, although nothing in the backgrounds of these dead men could account for this. To the contrary, every one of them was fairly prosperous, comparatively healthy and without any nagging responsibilities. Three were widowers, one a bachelor.

All died within a 10-mile radius of 179 Fernwood Road. Each death occurred several months apart. In all cases the corpse was

found sitting in the driver's seat of his car which was parked in an out-of-the-way place—a dead-end lane, a cemetery, a dump, a theater parking lot—with a hose running from the exhaust pipe through a nearly closed window. The hose was, in each case, a common garden variety colored red.

My modest contribution to the evidence against Gluck was the motive and the *modus operandi*—in other words, my check for \$15,000 and the written agreement which it was supposed to bind.

"I'd photograph both those items right away if I were you," I told the state police lieutenant in charge.

"Why is that?"

"By morning the ink may have vanished, just as I told you it did on the letters sent to my old man."

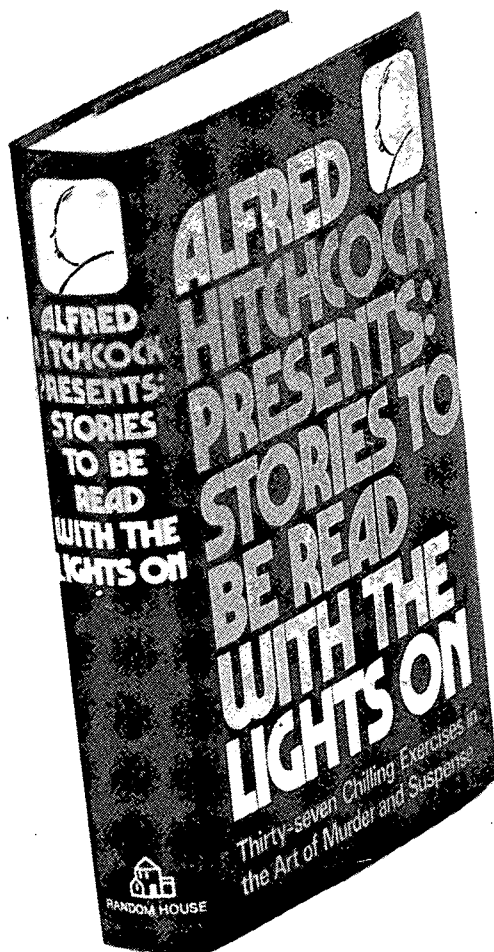
"On the agreement that Gluck wrote out, yes," the lieutenant said. "But on the check you made out too?"

"On the check too," I said. "I have a friend in Bridgeport who's a chemist. On the way over here this afternoon I stopped at his place and filled my fountain pen."

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Adherence to hypotheses, one learns, must also be reconciled with the chronological progression of time.



Miss Margaret's Lombroso

The Victorian house stood on a small knoll of carefully cut devil grass, surrounded by primly clipped hedges. A weekly gardener, son of a son, clipped the hedges and mowed the browning devil grass.

An engraved brass plate on the front door announced, with quiet dignity, that this was the house of Elwell B. Stillwell, Esq. Inside, Miss Margaret Stillwell, the daughter, lived alone.

The house smelled of lemon furniture polish, dusty velvet and old leather; the library was lined, from floor to twelve-foot ceiling,

Pauline C. Smith

MISS MARGARET'S LOMBROSO

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with books, not one issue of which was copyrighted later than the date of 1925, during which year Miss Margaret's scholar-father died, and the ordinarily chronological progression of time ceased.

Her ailing mother, who lived for another twenty-five years, offered the deathbed suggestion that Margaret find a suitable companion to share her loneliness.

Miss Margaret's life was not lonely, however, with the Brontë sisters and the Brownings for literature and poetry, with Shakespeare for drama, Gibbon for history and Lombroso, the criminologist, for the study of character. Her companions were her scholarly father's out-of-date books, catalogued with neat little hand-printed stickers affixed to the shelf edges to denote the section of knowledge offered.

Miss Margaret had educated herself and continued to do so with classic profundity as well as outmoded assumption, much of it anachronistic information by the time it entered and became imprinted on her mind.

She lived alone with her books and, therefore, talked to herself—a sophist; a grammarian—never splitting an infinitive and using *whom* in all the correct places. She recited whole verses and chapters of the Bible with self-ex-

hortations from Billy Sunday's published sermons, unaware of a more modern but just as fundamental Billy Graham. She reviewed the Punic Wars with accuracy, never having heard of the Vietnam ordeal. She adored and quoted Virginia Woolf without knowing *Who Was Afraid*, or why.

Miss Margaret, the teacher, communed with Miss Margaret, the student. She ingested lapsed mores and past theories without a thought that the one could have changed and the other might have been superimposed, offering them back to self-teacher and self-student as intellectual and unalterable fact.

Miss Margaret was a scholar as her father had been, and a gentlewoman patterned after her mother. She talked to no one but herself; except, of course, that she spoke once a week, on the phone, to the proprietor of the grocery store, son of a son, to order her groceries, ignorant of the fact that she was the only customer left to receive the archaic service of home delivery.

She found it unnecessary to speak with the gardener, the son of a son, when she silently paid him on the front porch once a month.

She had no paper boy to speak

to because she subscribed to no newspaper. However, each year, when her legs trembled and the pain in her knees grew acute, she thought of her mother's dying request, and phoned the newspaper office to insert an advertisement: **WANTED—MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN AS A COMPANION.**

She placed her order when the weather was warm or warming, so that interviews could be conducted in the safety of her front porch. Miss Margaret was well aware that the criminal element in the United States had increased alarmingly following the influx of immigrants in 1922. It was, therefore, her habit to investigate each applicant with Lombroso-educated suspicion, out in the open, so that no harm would befall her.

She looked forward to the yearly interviews as an interesting test of her Lombrosian knowledge and when the doorbell, an old-fashioned brass handle that twisted its message shrilly, sounded through the Victorian rooms, Miss Margaret picked up her mental clipboard of antedated information and marched to the front porch.

There, her lips stern with prejudice and her eyes coldly implacable with misconception, she either called off the interview on the spot or proceeded to ask such astonishing questions that the in-

sulted applicant herself cut it short in a rage.

"Do you have extremely acute eyesight?" she asked a passable applicant which, while rather a strange question, might have been a suitable one had Miss Margaret, for instance, been in need of a companion capable of doing very fine work.

The second question, "Do you feel pain readily or are you insensitive of it?" became borderline, almost suspect; a question that could, but only with a bit of stretching, be considered an expedient one should Miss Margaret be thinking of the steepness of the staircase, the treachery of a warped kitchen floor, or any one of a dozen accident traps in an old Victorian house, to harry and wrack a pain-sensitive companion.

The third, a two-part question of an ambivalent nature, was the one to send the applicant stamping angrily down the porch steps: "Are you excessively idle and do you have a love of orgies?" Off stamped the applicant and Miss Margaret continued to live alone in the Victorian house with her books of outdated theories and a firm conviction that she had been spared a violent and untimely end because of her strict adherence to the Lombroso hypotheses.

"Spared," she often told herself

aloud, with absolute certainty that each applicant through all the years to mount her porch steps had been a criminal capable of fearful deeds.

She quoted the long-dead criminologist in the quiet of her library, knowing him by heart, listing the physical stigmata he had claimed to be present in each and every criminal, using the hysterically extravagant terminology of seventy-five years ago. "Enormous jaws," Miss Margaret told herself, "high cheekbones, prominent superciliary arches, facial asymmetry, handle-shaped or sessile ears," nodding over the memory of the handle ears as well as the lobeless ones that she had encountered and evaded on her front porch.

"Insensibility to pain and extremely acute sight," she quoted, remembering her interview questions. "Excessive idleness and love of orgies;" remembering too, the stamping off of those applicants who had lasted until the double query.

"Such criminals have an irresistible craving for evil and the desire to extinguish life," shuddered Miss Margaret, and gave thanks above for what she had missed because her father had been a scholar and she had inherited his books.

"Prognathism," she quoted,

"thin, lanky locks, oblique eyes, small cranium, receding forehead . . ." One could not be too careful, she told herself, so she was very careful until the spring following the cold and rainy winter of her 75th year during which her bones ached and her knees cracked in the stillness.

She phoned in her newspaper ad earlier than usual, before the weather was truly warm, and the first applicant arrived on a day of windy chill. Because of her knees, but after she had looked the applicant over with a knowledgeable and practiced eye, she invited her inside the house; only to the other side of the front door, however, no farther than the entrance hall.

Miss Margaret was careless that day, careless because of her knees and her trembling weariness and the fact that the woman's gray hair dipped low on her forehead and covered her ears. She concentrated on the soft, boneless, symmetrical face, asked her questions, hardly listening to the strangled replies, and suggested with a proud humility that the applicant become her companion.

The woman had not far to go for her already-packed suitcase; only across the street and down the block to another Victorian house with a ROOMS TO LET

sign in the front window. She was back in minutes, twisting the bell handle, worried that the crazy old lady inside might have already forgotten her, might have changed her mind, when the door opened and she was led with a fierce and distant graciousness to a bedroom down the hall, opposite a room that appeared to be a library.

There she was deposited without comment.

The woman opened her suitcase on the high-backed old bed with thanksgiving. She unpacked two uniforms, a blouse, skirt and sweater, and the small mementos given to her by her semigrateful patients—castoffs—a scarf, chipped figurine, a music box; things she did not need and could not use except for one, and she adjusted her hair, carefully combing the dip, and found the kitchen.

Wonderful, wonderful, she thought with gratitude, treading the warped pine floorboards, planning to scrub them to bright and polished warmth. The house was quiet, safe and comforting, a final port of safety, and she hoped the old lady, with her awful questions and her questing eye, was not too crazy.

She checked the ancient refrigerator with its strange circular coils rising from the top, and checked the pantry and checked

the cupboards. Then, humming to herself, she began to mix and stir. She struck a kitchen match and lit the oven, gauging the length of flame, adjusting it to what would possibly be medium heat.

She found Miss Margaret in the library, bent over a large book. She cleared her throat to inform her employer how grateful she was for this place to stay. "I will cook and clean," she promised, her voice a genuflection of thanksgiving. "I will take care of you."

"You have good cheeks and good eyes," remarked Miss Margaret, and the woman backed from the room with a nervous quiver of the gray brow-dip.

She peeked through the downstairs rooms, impressed by old-world elegance, appalled by the dust, and fired with plans. Back in the kitchen, she drew the casserole from the oven, brown and bubbling; and the pastry, puffed and crusty. She found a tray, washed the Haviland, and carried the dinner, proud and steaming, to the library.

Miss Margaret was surprised. She looked at the boneless face, the wide eyes, silently thanked Lombroso for leading her into the paths of safety, and ate a good dinner.

The woman was satisfied. This might be all right even with, the

crazy old lady. She dried the dishes and put them away, and swept the kitchen and turned out the lights. It might really be all right and she could lay herself down and rest and not worry about practical nursing jobs that came along all too rarely so that she had to count her pennies and wonder if she could pay her next month's room rent and still have enough left to buy food.

She explained, from the library door, that she was very tired and would prepare for bed if there was nothing more to do for Miss Margaret, who smiled back at the gray-framed symmetrical face of the woman who seemed to be so right.

It was a few minutes later that Miss Margaret began to talk aloud to herself as she had done for so many years.

The woman undressed and put on a nightgown and robe, turned down her bed and opened the door a listening two inches.

She looked at the chipped figurine, at the music box on the high-mirrored dresser, and took off the recently acquired wig, the only patient-gift she could use. Picking up the heavy silver brush from the dresser, she dabbed at the strands of her own slack and tired hair, brushing them away from the slanted forehead, behind

the lobeless ears . . . and then she heard the sounds.

Talking! In this house! So who was talking with Miss Margaret alone in the library?

Her companion instincts, the desire to protect, flowered in alarm, and the limp-tressed woman moved toward the door, brush in hand. Pushing it open, she heard the cadence, the undulations of a voice.

She stepped across the hall to see Miss Margaret in a circle of light at the desk, speaking over, into, around and outside the volume before her—speaking to herself and Lombroso-yellowed pages.

Miss Margaret looked up.

"I thought," the woman said with hesitation, peering into the shadows, "I thought someone might have come in. I heard talking." She entered the circle of light with reluctance, the hair-brush upraised to ward off a lurking interloper. "I thought," she repeated, "that I heard . . ."

It was then that Miss Margaret clearly saw the woman she had brought into her home. She recoiled, gasped, trembled and attempted to rise, her mouth gaping in terror.

"I thought . . ." the woman began again, and stared. "I thought someone . . ."

"Criminal!" cried Miss Marga-

ret, her alarmed voice cracking.

The woman darted a cautious glance back over her shoulder in search of the criminal.

Dragging herself from the chair, Miss Margaret lurched to her feet. "Criminal!" she shrieked, and started forward, stumbling on age-weak legs, reaching out hands raised in defense, fingers curled in attack.

Instinctively then, and just as defensively, the woman hurled the silver brush in panic and Miss Margaret dropped to the floor with a sigh.

Shuddering and shrinking, the woman edged closer, sounds of distress soft in her throat. She bent stiffly forward, plucked the lamp from the desk and, leaning over, held it low. She touched a wrist and touched the forehead

and looked away, sad and afraid.

As she shakily placed the lamp back on the desk, its circle of light danced over the shadowed books to throw into sharp relief the deceptive archaisms of Lombroso and shine down upon the body of Miss Margaret.

The woman crouched in indecisive shock just before she hurried to her temporary room to dress and pack the uniforms, the skirt, blouse and sweater, as well as the scarf, the chipped figurine and music box. She covered her sparse locks with the lovely gray wig that dipped on her brow and hugged her ears, and told herself that she had only wanted a place to live and someone to need her.

Instead, she had found a crazy lady who leaped upon her with taloned fingers.



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MISS MARGARET'S LOMBROSO

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Regrettably, a poor judge of character is always at a disadvantage.



No Reason

to Die



Gavin Guthrie stepped off the elevator into the carpeted reception area, feeling slightly uncomfortable in the plush surroundings as he always did when he reported in.

The blonde receptionist looked up, smiled her polished professional smile and said: "Mr. Conway wants to see you."

Guthrie moved past the desk and toward the cubbyhole they had given him, where he shed his rain-spattered hat and coat, straightened his tired tie and walked down the hall toward Conway's office. He limped only slightly, mainly on days like this when the spring rain came out of the northeast on a bitter wind and the old bullet wound made his leg vulnerable to a slight stiffness and pain. The slug had cost him his job on the homicide squad, forcing him into a disability retirement and the job with Conway's detective agency. It wasn't the same as being on the force, but as Guthrie often told himself, it was better than being a department store detective. If he stayed at it long enough, he might even get to like it.

a novelette

Conway's secretary, a lacquered and cosmetic-veneered duplicate of the receptionist, nodded to him and pressed a button on her desk. "Mr. Guthrie is here," she said

professionally, smiling at the air.

Conway's disembodied voice hung in the office: "Ask him to come in."

Guthrie pushed open the walnut door.

Conway was behind his big desk, a small man with sharp features that Guthrie always thought mirrored the sharp mind.

In a chair before the desk, a young brunette looked up at Guthrie, measured him and turned back to Conway. Guthrie estimated her to be in her mid-twenties.

"This is Mrs. Trapp," Conway said.

Guthrie nodded. He had taken in the short, curled hair, the almost square, thin face that just missed being pretty, and the too short skirt, and classified her as

by Stephen
Wasylyk

another divorce case, which Guthrie hated and Conway knew he hated. He was wrong.

"Mrs. Trapp's husband is in trouble and she would like our help," Conway said.

The woman nodded and turned to Guthrie again, her eyes dark now with a faint appeal.

"She is from Longwood City."

Small town, about sixty miles away, Guthrie's mind told him; farming country mainly, a big watch manufacturer as the main industry, electronics moving in . . . county seat . . . small police force that would call on the state police for anything complicated.

"Mr. Trapp is being held for armed robbery and felony murder," Conway continued. "His wife is certain he is innocent. I have said we might look into it." Conway stood up. "I suggest you take Mrs. Trapp to your office. She will give you the details."

Guthrie held the door for Mrs. Trapp, aware as she passed that she was very tall and thin and wearing a perfume he couldn't identify. He was also aware that this was Conway's way of placing the case on a personal-relationship level because he knew the woman would talk more freely in Guthrie's small cubbyhole on the intimate one-to-one basis.

Guthrie deposited Mrs. Trapp in a chair, slid behind his desk and forced what he hoped was a reassuring smile. "Suppose you start at the beginning."

She cleared her throat hesitantly, as if not knowing where the beginning was. "Vernon is innocent. I know it. He couldn't do what they say he did."

"What do they accuse him of?"

"Holding up the Bristol Real Estate office and shooting a clerk named Johnson. He would have never done anything like that."

"Why do they think he did?"

"A policeman saw his car pull away. A roadblock stopped him, and Mrs. Bristol identified him. She's lying."

"Has your husband ever been in trouble before?"

She shifted in her chair and looked out of the window to avoid Guthrie's eyes. In profile she looked younger; Guthrie estimated twenty-two. She turned in sudden defense. "But not for something like this!"

"What did he do?"

"When he was younger, he used to steal cars. He was caught. He was in prison for three years. When he got out, he put all that behind him, but they hold it against him. They always will."

"How much money was taken?"

"A few hundred dollars. Vernon had that much, but it was his own. They say that Mrs. Bristol happened to send a great deal of money to the bank before the holdup man got there."

"Lucky for Mrs. Bristol, but why would a real estate office have much cash on hand?"

"She says it's rental money. She manages properties and some people pay their rent in cash."

It was something Guthrie had never considered. "And she identified your husband?"

"They had a lineup and she picked him out."

"Does she know your husband?"

"I don't think so."

"Why was the clerk shot?"

"Mrs. Bristol says there was no reason. The holdup man was on his way out, and just turned and killed him. Mrs. Bristol says it was because he must have been angry at not getting much money. Vernon couldn't do that. He could never kill anybody."

"What does your husband do for a living?"

"He has his own garage and auto body shop."

"Is he in debt?"

"No."

"So your husband had no reason to try a holdup?"

"None." Her hands, at rest all this time, had started to move, fingers locking and interlocking. Guthrie felt he had touched a nerve.

"You're certain of that?"

"We didn't need any money. Vernon has been very busy. He says he has more business than he can handle."

Guthrie sensed she wasn't telling him something and that she wouldn't tell him, no matter how he pressed. "Why did he go to the

real estate office, Mrs. Trapp?"

"He won't say. He just won't talk about it."

Fine, Guthrie mused. Trapp is entitled to keep his mouth shut, but he doesn't have a thing going for him except his wife's insistence he was innocent. If that were true every time it happened, no one would ever get convicted.

"What do you expect me to do?"

Her hands stopped moving. "Someone has to help Vernon. His lawyer says that as things are now, Vernon will be found guilty."

No question of that, Guthrie knew.

"I want you to talk to Vernon," she said. "You'll see he had nothing to do with it. There has to be an answer somewhere. If Vernon didn't do it, maybe you can find out who did."

Guthrie couldn't help feeling it would be useless. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Wait here." He walked back down the corridor to Conway's office, past the secretary and into Conway's inner sanctum. Conway turned from the window. "Well?"

"I don't think there's anything we can do," said Guthrie. "It will probably take a great deal of time and money to look into it, and there's no guarantee it will work

out the way she would like. Her husband may be guilty."

"She insists that he is not."

"Wives always insist on that. For the most part it's wishful thinking. I suggest we tell her we can't help her."

Conway pulled out his chair and sat down, resting his elbows on the desk, one thin finger drawing invisible circles on the pad. "I do have someone else coming in. A man who suspects that his wife—"

"Forget it," said Guthrie. "You know how I feel about those."

"Well, you do have a choice. I think we owe Mrs. Trapp the courtesy of at least looking into the situation. If you went up there, things might appear differently. There would certainly be no harm in trying. Go to Longwood. Talk to the people involved. Then make your decision. If you still feel the same way, you can be back this evening."

Conway always had a way of putting things so that it sounded as though a choice could be made, but Guthrie knew he had no choice. "I guess you're the boss," he said.

Conway smiled as if he were well aware of it.

Guthrie let Mrs. Trapp return to Longwood City on her own.

He wanted no company on the drive, he wanted his own transportation when he got there and he wanted it handy when he decided to leave. There were two routes to Longwood City: the old road which leisurely wound its way through a seemingly endless succession of small towns with traffic lights, or the slightly longer but faster interstate highway.

Guthrie took the interstate, ignoring the speed limit in spite of the rain, with the feeling that the sooner he got there the sooner he would be able to return. An hour and a half later, he was in the center of Longwood City.

The town was built around a courthouse square, and the massive building, towered and turreted and of age-blackened granite, dominated the downtown district. Police headquarters would be inside, along with the holding cells for people awaiting trial. A cobblestoned driveway bisected the square, slanting under the big building, marked by a pole sign that glowed on this dim, rainy day with the word *Police* and an arrow pointing down the driveway at the dark arch below the building. Guthrie slid his car into a parking slot, walked across the street and followed the direction the arrow indicated. He opened a door, and a desk sergeant told him

the case was being handled by a Lieutenant Chaney, who could be found through the green door at the end of the hall.

Guthrie knocked and turned the knob.

The man at the desk was dressed in a baggy gray suit, his hair silver and his skin weathered into a deep tan. He had a full, heavy face above a heavy body that leaned toward Guthrie expectantly.

"You the private guy. Trapp hired?"

"Hired by his wife to see what I could do. She thinks he's innocent."

"No chance."

"I have a job to do. Mind filling me in?"

"You could see his lawyer."

"I don't know the man. I don't know how good he is. I like information direct from the source, then I'd like to hear Trapp's story."

"I don't have to tell you a thing."

"I know the rules. I also know nice guys break them."

"Who said I was a nice guy?"

"No reason for you not to be."

Chaney smiled. "I'll buy that. What do you want to know?"

"The holdup first."

"A guy wearing no hat, a handkerchief mask and mechanic's cov-

eralls walked into the Bristol Real Estate office while everybody was out to lunch except Mrs. Bristol and a clerk named Johnson. He waved a gun and collected about two hundred dollars from Mrs. Bristol. If he'd been a half hour earlier, he would have hit for almost two thousand, but she sent the money to the bank with one of the girls on the way to lunch. The guy started to back out when, for no reason that anyone knows, he pulled the trigger on Johnson. The cop directing traffic heard the shot, saw the guy run out and hop into a brown Cadillac and take off. He ran into the office, saw what had happened and called in, giving the description of the Cadillac. We put up roadblocks immediately and picked up Trapp, so we brought him in and put him in a lineup where Mrs. Bristol picked him out. Now, that's what was in the papers and that's all you're entitled to know."

"Mrs. Bristol was the only witness?"

"Johnson can't talk."

It seemed cut and dried to Guthrie. "Do you have any more? Why Trapp hit the real estate office, if he did?"

"I couldn't tell you without permission of the county attorney."

"Find the gun on Trapp?"

"No, but that means nothing. He could have ditched it anywhere."

"How long has he lived here?"

"All his life."

"What about that record of his? Did you bust him?"

"We sure did. He was the slickest car thief I've ever come across. He could open a locked car and drive off while you were still fumbling for your keys. As far as I know, he's stayed clean. If the cop hadn't seen the Cadillac, we'd never have made the connection."

"That was a lucky break."

He shrugged. "This business sometimes runs on lucky breaks."

"Had Mrs. Bristol known Trapp before?"

"That's what makes it so valid. She says she didn't, yet she picked him out. You want to see Trapp now?"

Guthrie stood up. "I suppose so."

"Let me warn you. This Trapp is really something else."

"You sound like he has no redeeming features."

"As far as I know, he doesn't. He did me one favor, though. I'm due to retire next month and I'm happy I can close out this killing. We don't get many around here and I wouldn't have wanted to leave with this one open."

Guthrie nodded, thinking that was what every man's job came down to in the end: closing it out with a clean slate.

Chaney himself led Guthrie through a maze of passages under the courthouse to the prison wing. Guthrie almost lost track of the twists and turnings. "I don't suppose you have very many escapes. A man couldn't find his way out."

Chaney chuckled. "It isn't that difficult. They're supposed to build a nice new building for us one of these days, but I doubt if I'll live to see it. Makes it convenient to take prisoners to court, though. All we have to do is send them right up the elevator and there we are."

He ushered Guthrie into a small room bisected by a waist-high partition, a fine wire mesh above the partition extending to the low ceiling. The room had once been painted white, but the paint had aged into a dingy yellow that was cracking and peeling in the corners, revealing a dull green underneath.

Guthrie felt a touch of claustrophobia when Chaney closed the door, conscious of the huge mass of the courthouse above him.

The door on the other side of the partition was opened by a tall, angular young man, bony shoulders projecting sharply against a

gray prison shirt, long blond hair parted in the center and falling to his earlobes. The face was sharply planed, the nose hawkish; a strong face, a face that would be attractive to women.

His hands came up and the fingers hooked the mesh like the talons of a predatory bird. "Who the hell are you?"

The room was warm and close. Guthrie slipped out of his raincoat. "My name is Guthrie. Your wife hired our agency to help you."

"A private dick? Forget it!"

"She is quite upset."

"I don't give a damn about that dumb broad. Didn't she tell you I pulled out on her over a month ago?"

Guthrie folded his raincoat neatly and draped it over his arm. "She neglected to mention that."

"She would. I told her to stay out of my life. I don't want her near me. Is that clear?"

The voice was savage and biting, but Guthrie smiled. "I'm not her personal supervisor. She asked for help. We thought we'd see what we can do."

"I don't need any help. If I did, I wouldn't call on her. She's out of my life. When you see her, tell her to stay out."

Guthrie moved away from the partition to the one window in

the room. It looked out on a cement-lined passageway alongside the building, the dripping rain painting the gray wall with jagged peaks of chocolate brown.

Trapp was something he hadn't expected at all. For the second time that day the Trapp family had surprised him.

He turned to Trapp. "Does that mean she's wrong?"

"No, she's not wrong. This rap is a real bummer."

"And you still want no help?"

"I'll handle it." The voice was vicious, malignant. "I'll handle the whole thing."

Guthrie studied him through the mesh. The lips were pulled thin, setting ruthless lines in the flat cheeks. He didn't know just how Trapp was going to handle it, but at this point he didn't care. He reached for his coat.

"Tell that stupid broad to keep away from me," snapped Trapp. "If she doesn't, she'll regret it. And that goes for you, too."

"I'll be happy to give her the message," Guthrie said. "More than happy." He stepped out into the hall, leaving Trapp glaring after him. He had seldom met anyone he disliked immediately as much as he disliked Trapp. Mrs. Trapp deserved something far better.

He worked his way back to

Chaney's office, thinking that he should have trusted his instincts earlier and saved himself a trip to Longwood City.

Chaney was in his office, leafing through a sheaf of reports, when Guthrie tapped at the door. He grinned. "You didn't spend much time with your client."

"He's not our client."

Chaney fingered the papers into a neat stack. "Which means?"

"He doesn't want us to help him."

"Funny attitude for a supposedly innocent man."

"You meet all kinds," said Guthrie. He sighed and reached for a chair. "Did you know that Trapp left his wife a month ago?"

"No. Does it matter?"

"To her, I suppose. To no one else. He refuses to accept any help from her or from me even though he claims it's a bum rap."

"Just who does he expect to help him?"

"He says he'll take care of it himself."

"How does he intend to do that?"

"I don't know, but if I were you I'd make sure he wasn't planning to leave that pleasant cell you've assigned to him."

"You can bet on it. Are you washing your hands of the whole thing?"

"As soon as I talk to Mrs. Trapp."

"Then you might as well hang around. She called a little while ago, wanting to know if she could see her husband. She should be here any minute."

"From the way Trapp talked, he won't see her."

Chaney shrugged. "That's their business. She wanted permission. I gave it. The rest is out of my hands."

Mrs. Trapp came in then, seeming taller and thinner than Guthrie remembered. She stopped before Guthrie. "You saw him?"

"I saw him. It was a waste of time." He told her about his visit to her husband. "You didn't mention that he had left you."

"It isn't important."

"I would think you wouldn't care what happened to him."

"I care," she said softly. Her eyes found Chaney. "Can I see him now?"

Chaney stepped from behind the desk. "I'll take you."

Guthrie had the feeling that in spite of her brief smile, she knew she was heading toward something unpleasant. She looked young and very vulnerable. Guthrie revised his estimate of her age downward. She couldn't be more than twenty.

He settled back in a chair after they had gone. He could be

wrong, but Mrs. Trapp should be back in tears. He would tell her then that there was little he could do for her or her husband; that things would have to take their course; that while she didn't believe her husband could kill anyone, Guthrie thought it not only possible but likely.

He let his mind play with what he already knew, and how much more he would have to know if he stayed with it, shrugging off the thought that it could be interesting.

A man like Trapp was always interesting because he was too arrogant and self-centered to have pleasant relations with anyone.

Mrs. Trapp's clicking footsteps preceded her down the hall. Guthrie rose as she came into the office.

"He wouldn't talk to you," he said.

"That's the way Vernon is." Her eyes were bright but there were no tears.

"Yet you want me to help him."

"He needs help."

"A man can't be helped unless he is willing to help himself."

"No," she said. "Sometimes you must do it in spite of him."

"That's not my philosophy," said Guthrie. "Which is why I'm returning to the city."

"I don't want you to do that." The tears that had been held in check now trickled down her cheeks.

Guthrie looked at Chaney. Chaney shrugged, indicating it was Guthrie's problem. How to handle a weeping woman couldn't be taught in police academies, and some people simply never learned. Guthrie never had. He reached out and took her arm, trying to bridge the gap between them.

"Suppose I try to explain it to you," he said.

"Good idea," Chaney put in. "Why don't you take Mrs. Trapp to lunch? She can probably use a cup of hot coffee."

Guthrie was still looking for help. "Why don't you join us?"

Chaney indicated the file on his desk. "I'll take a rain check. I'm trying to get straightened out on these stolen-car reports."

Guthrie tugged gently at Mrs. Trapp's arm. "We'll find a quiet place."

"Right across the street," said Chaney. "They have nice, high-backed booths. People won't disturb you."

They walked together through the misty rain, Guthrie's leg beginning to ache again, the young woman's fingers clutching his arm and making him feel that she had to hold onto something at that

particular moment and only he was available.

Guthrie wished it were someone else.

The restaurant was as Chaney had said: small, uncrowded and warm, steam masking the broad plate-glass windows and blocking out the world. They sat in the rear and Guthrie ordered for them both, knowing that the young woman would pick at the food, no matter what was placed before her; keeping the conversation away from Trapp until the meal was finished, he settled back with his second cup of coffee.

"To get back to your husband," he said. "It would be better to let things alone."

"I don't want it that way. I can't have it that way."

"Does it matter? He's already left you. You owe him nothing."

"You don't understand."

"I think I do. No matter what he has done, you still love him and want to stick by him. That's perfectly normal and natural, but you should be realistic enough to face the facts. In my opinion, he's not only capable of the holdup but also of the killing. He may not have treated you badly . . ."

Her hand flew to her face, long fingers caressing her cheek as if trying to erase the pain of some long-healed bruise.

"Ah," said Guthrie. "He did hit you."

She nodded. "There were times . . ."

"Then why bother with him at all? You're better off without him. Let him stay in jail. He can't hurt you where he is."

"You don't understand," she repeated.

"I guess I don't. You'll have to explain it to me."

"I love Vernon. I need him. As long as he's in jail, I'm all alone. I have no family, no one to help. If Vernon were out, he might come back to me."

Guthrie stirred his coffee. "But why? It would be far better to break clean. You're certainly young enough and attractive enough to get a job, support yourself and make new friends. You don't need your husband or anyone else. It will be simple for you to get a divorce and it shouldn't be too expensive. Cut off your husband. It will be better in the long run."

The tears glistened again. "What you say would work out fine for about six months. Then I would be in trouble."

"Now I really don't understand."

"I need my husband's support. I'll need it badly by winter and from then on. He can't do a thing

for me if he's in prison. Once he is free and I explain it to him, I'm sure he'll come back."

"Explain what?"

She sighed. "I'm pregnant."

Guthrie sipped the coffee slowly, conscious of an underlying bitter taste that would probably stay with him all afternoon. "Is there anyone else who can help?"

She shook her head. "I don't even have any friends."

"The city and county have agencies . . ."

"I don't want charity. I want what every woman is entitled to—support from her husband. He can't give it to me if he's in jail, and he shouldn't be in jail because he is innocent. All you have to do is prove it."

Guthrie felt like groaning. They were back to Trapp's innocence again, something he found hard to believe, but the woman wasn't going to accept that because she didn't want to accept it. Only innocence would get Trapp out, which was where she wanted him so that he could support her and the coming baby. That was wishful thinking, too, Guthrie thought. Once free, Trapp wasn't the kind of man who would cheerfully help because it was the proper thing to do. The young woman was kidding herself by thinking that way, but Guthrie knew she wasn't go-

ing to listen if he tried to tell her so.

"Now you see why you must help me," she said.

What Guthrie saw was that he should climb into his car and head back to the city to tell Conway there was nothing he could do, but he made no move to leave. She was wrong, she had to be wrong, but in her mind he was the only one who could help her at the moment. He remembered the way she had clung to his arm on the way to the restaurant.

She was wearing a blouse with a big bow under her chin that made her look younger than ever, her only makeup a slash of lip coloring that hadn't been applied too well.

"How old are you?" asked Guthrie.

"Eighteen," she said proudly.

Ah now, Guthrie reflected. She should be starting college and looking forward to a rich, happy life instead of facing a lonely pregnancy. Her brown eyes were fixed on him confidently, mirroring a young world where people helped people because they were asked and no one ever said no.

"All right," he said. "I'll go a little further, but in the meantime go see your husband's lawyer. Your husband was a businessman. He has assets. You're probably en-

titled to your share of them as his wife. Did you own a house?"

"We had an apartment and the rent for that hasn't been paid this month."

The thought struck Guthrie then. "How have you managed?"

"Vernon used to be very generous. I had some money set aside. It's almost all gone."

"And how did you intend to pay for a private detective?"

"I thought Vernon would be happy to do that if he got out."

Guthrie shook his head, leaned back and chuckled. Conway hadn't checked this young woman to see if she was in a position to pay for more than one day's work, had insisted that Guthrie look into her problem. Let Conway worry about the bill.

"Now," he said, "just who would be the best person to help your husband? Who knew him, who worked with him, who would know most about him?"

"I guess you should go to his garage. Pete Danowski is sort of the boss when Vernon isn't there. He can tell you a great deal about Vernon. You'll see. Vernon was doing so well, he wouldn't have to commit a holdup to get money. Pete will tell you that. Vernon used to come home with a pocketful of cash that people had paid him. He used to just throw it at

me, he had so much. I used to save it because I couldn't spend it all. Things were fine before he left. I thought we had nothing to worry about. Then he changed . . ."

"How did he change?"

"He started to treat me very roughly, as if he resented my being there. He told me to get out a couple of times, but I thought it was something he would get over. Then one evening he didn't come home at all. He came back the next day, packed his clothes and left. I went to the garage several times to see him but he wasn't there. The next thing I knew, I read in the paper that he was arrested."

"You don't know why he left?"

She shrank a little in the booth. "The usual reason, I guess. Another woman."

"You don't know who it was?"

"I had no way to know. Maybe Pete can tell you."

"She didn't come forward when Vernon was arrested?"

"Maybe she couldn't. Maybe she's married and she can't let her husband know."

Guthrie thought it was odd that she would be defending her unknown rival, but he had given up trying to understand women a long time ago. He stood up. "I'll go talk to Pete. You do what I

told you to do. See Vernon's lawyer and try to get living expenses from the profits of his garage. I don't know if he can do anything, but it's worth a try."

She sighed. "It would all be so simple if Vernon was out."

"I think not. He wouldn't come back to you and he wouldn't give you any money. More than likely Vernon would be right back where he started."

"Why?"

"They would jail him for non-support," Guthrie said dryly.

He left her in front of the restaurant, picked up his car and followed the directions she had given him to Trapp's garage, which turned out to be two one-story, white-painted square buildings on an unpaved back street on the outskirts of town. Several cars were parked on one side, leaving the wide entrances clear. Adjacent was a big used-car lot fronting on a busy street beyond. The lot held rows of assorted models that appeared dingy in spite of the glistening coat of rain, colorful pennants hanging limply overhead.

Guthrie limped around the puddles to a side door, pushed it open and stepped inside. Fluorescent bulbs lining the ceiling reflected from three cars, two with their hoods up, the other head-high on a lift.

He moved around to the front of the near car and tapped the overalled shoulder of the man leaning over the engine.

The man came out from under the hood reluctantly. He was smaller than Guthrie, broad-shouldered, with tightly curled, reddish hair and a sparse moustache sprouting in the center of a round, fleshy face.

"You're Pete Danowski?" asked Guthrie.

The man nodded. "We can't take any more work right now."

"That's not why I'm here. My name is Guthrie. I've been hired by Mrs. Trapp to help her husband."

Danowski placed a wrench down, reached into his back pocket for a rag and wiped his hands slowly. "A private cop?"

Guthrie nodded. The man working on the car alongside began to hammer.

"What do you want?" Danowski spaced the words between crashes.

"Just some information. Mrs. Trapp insists her husband is innocent. So does he."

Danowski motioned him to a quieter corner of the garage. "I never believed it myself. Vernon didn't have to pull a holdup. This shop is doing fine."

"The Cadillac was identified, he

has no alibi, and the woman put the finger on him."

Danowski threw the rag at the workbench disgustedly. "Sure she did. She'd seen him before."

Guthrie drew a careful breath. "She says she didn't know him."

"That's a lie. That office handles car insurance. About six months ago, we had a repair job for one of their clients. The guy busted a fender and we gave him an estimate. The office called for confirmation and Vernon went over there."

"So Trapp knew that office?"

"Sure he knew it. He probably met the woman there."

"She may not remember."

He shook his head. "No woman is going to forget Vernon."

"She just might remember seeing him somewhere and got him mixed up with the holdup man. Memory plays weird tricks."

"Maybe, but someone ought to look into it. Without her identification, Vernon might walk out."

Guthrie had to agree with him. "You didn't tell this to the police?"

"Nobody ever asked me about the woman. I thought they'd know."

The door opened and a short, fat man stepped through, his checkered sport coat buttoned over a bulging belly, one pudgy

hand drying the rain from his face with a handkerchief. He glanced at Guthrie, dismissed him and faced Danowski. "That car ready yet?"

"Not yet," Danowski said. "I told you it would be done today, but not what time."

"I need it," the man said irritably.

"You'll have to wait." Danowski indicated Guthrie. "This is Mr. Guthrie. He's a private dick trying to help Vernon."

The fat man's beady eyes swiveled to Guthrie and he held out a hand. "I'm Brad Nichols, a friend of Vernon's. You making any progress?"

"Not much." The man's hand was warm and flaccid.

"I wish you luck," he said. He went out into the rain again.

Danowski jerked a thumb after him. "He runs that used-car lot next door. Gives us quite a bit of business, so he thinks we owe him."

"How long can you keep going without Trapp?"

"Only until the end of the week. The work is here, but I can't handle the business end without Vernon. Almost all of the money comes in checks made out to Vernon, so we don't handle enough cash to make it pay. I'll finish what's here and close down.

I can make a living on my own. So can the other guys."

"Did you know Trapp left his wife?"

"Sure I knew it."

"Do you know why?"

"Another broad, I guess. Vernon was always one for the broads."

"Did you know her?"

"Never saw her. Never asked."

"Did you know where Trapp went after he left his wife?"

"I know he didn't move in with anyone. He took a room in a motel."

"I don't quite understand that."

Danowski shrugged. "He said he just wanted to come and go without his wife asking questions." He picked up his wrench. "I have to get finished. You want to know anything more?"

Guthrie shook his head. "I guess not." He followed Nichols out into the rain. Danowski had been of little help, except to repeat what Mrs. Trapp had said: Trapp's business was successful and there was no need for Trapp to become involved in a holdup. But he had come up with something new: Trapp had done business with the Bristol office.

Guthrie sat in the car, thinking that the next step had to be to see Mrs. Bristol. Both Mrs. Trapp and Danowski believed she lied when she said that she didn't know

Trapp. If Trapp had done business with her office, they could be right. But if they were, why had she lied? He wondered if Chaney knew about the connection, and decided that he didn't. When it came to trial, a good defense attorney would be able to shake Mrs. Bristol's testimony considerably and it was something that Chaney and the county attorney would have pinned down a great deal more carefully to avoid being embarrassed.

He drove a few squares until he spotted an outside phone booth. The directory inside gave him the address of the Bristol Real Estate office and a passerby told him how to get there.

He parked across the street. The office was lined up between a bookstore and a shoe shop not far from the courthouse, painted white, a huge plate-glass window lettered in gold with the words *H. Bristol*. Below that were the words *Real Estate*. The next line said in smaller letters: *Insurance*. Tucked away neatly in a corner were the words: *Property Management* and *Notary Public*.

There wasn't much more left to cover, Guthrie mused as he crossed the street and pushed open the door. The office was small, a few desks manned by young women arranged like

wooden sentinels behind a wrought-iron railing.

Guthrie smiled at the young woman behind the first desk. "I'd like to see Mrs. Bristol."

She returned his smile, and told him, "She has gone for the day."

"How about Mr. Bristol?"

"There is no Mr. Bristol. He's been dead about a year."

"My name is Guthrie. I'm investigating the trouble you had a few days ago. Do you know where I can reach Mrs. Bristol?"

"At home, I suppose. Is there anything we can do?"

"Perhaps," said Guthrie thoughtfully. "I suppose you knew the young man who was killed?"

The smile faded and the eyes dropped. "Of course. We all did."

"Would you know of any reason why the holdup man would shoot him?"

"No one could ever have a reason to shoot Frank. He was just nice, lots of fun. All he cared about was girls and that car of his."

"Something special about the car?"

"It was one of those expensive foreign sports cars. He inherited some money a few months ago."

"Exactly what did Johnson do here?"

"He handled all the automobile

insurance here for Mrs. Bristol."

"Then he would deal with the auto repair garage if there were an accident?"

"He had a big file on those."

Then he would have known Trapp. Remembrance of something Guthrie had read recently in the paper came to mind briefly and escaped again.

"The man they say did it—Vernon Trapp—did you ever see him in here?"

"Not that I remember. Mrs. Bristol says she never saw him either."

"I know. You have Mrs. Bristol's address?"

"I'm not sure Mrs. Bristol would want me to give it to you."

Guthrie smiled again. "I could look it up in the phone book. You'd only be saving me some time."

She giggled suddenly. "I suppose you're right, but she probably won't appreciate being disturbed at home. Don't let her know I gave it to you."

"Let me handle that. Sometimes I can be very charming."

She giggled again and wrote an address on a slip of paper. "It isn't far." She walked with him to the door and gave him directions.

The girl was right. It wasn't far. Mrs. Bristol lived in a town house on a quiet street, a home that

years ago must have been very expensive and possibly still was. Fluted brownstone pillars flanked the big front door below a portico that extended from the second floor. Guthrie mounted the steps and rang the bell.

The door opened. Since he had never heard her referred to as anything except *Mrs. Bristol*, Guthrie expected an elderly woman, gray-haired and sedate. What he saw was a woman in her thirties, blonde hair carefully cut and arranged close to a soft face with high cheekbones; dark eyes shadowed and slanted; wearing a tailored suit that Guthrie would bet had never been bought in Longwood.

"Yes?" The voice was low.

"Ah," said Guthrie, trying to remind himself that he had seen too many beautiful women to be affected by one. He recovered enough to tell her his name and why he was there.

She hesitated, then swung the door wide. "Come in."

Guthrie followed her into a sitting room off the marbled foyer that was like a picture from a home-furnishings magazine. The rug was soft and plush beneath his wet shoes and he felt like a small boy who hadn't wiped his feet sufficiently before entering.

"I don't understand what you

are trying to do, Mr. Guthrie."

"The police and the county attorney are interested only in a conviction. Trapp says he's innocent. I'm trying to help him."

"I saw the man do it. That should be sufficient."

"Witnesses have been mistaken."

"I am not mistaken."

"You've said you never saw Trapp before. He was in your office six months ago and possibly since then."

"Perhaps he was. If I met him, he made no impression."

"The possibility exists that Frank Johnson knew him."

"Only poor Frank could answer that, and he is dead. What does Trapp have to say?"

"Trapp refuses to talk to anyone about anything except to say that he's not guilty."

She smiled. "There you are. If he were innocent, he would have nothing to hide." She moved toward the door. "You are obviously speaking to the wrong person. I'll show you out, Mr. Guthrie."

Guthrie accepted the dismissal because he could think of nothing more to ask, still half-stunned by the sheer attractiveness of the woman. Testifying against Trapp, she would be devastating on the witness stand. The contrast was so

great, no jury would doubt a word she said.

He stood outside the house in the rain, wishing that Chaney or someone else had warned him about her, regretting the questions he hadn't asked and feeling that somewhere between the garage and her home he had overlooked something important.

Guthrie limped through the darkening wet streets to his car. He paused at an intersection to let traffic flow by, stepping back from the curb to avoid water sprayed up from the gutter by passing cars. A bus slowed and stopped to pick up passengers. Behind it a new Chevrolet, hemmed in behind the bus, stopped and waited. The car had been in an accident recently, its right front fender mashed and crumpled, and looking at it in the gray light, Guthrie began to feel the glimmering of an idea.

If Johnson had handled the accident repair cases covered by insurance, he would have had to know Trapp. That was definite. The newspaper story Guthrie had read came back to him now: a racket—a payoff. Johnson would recommend Trapp's garage for repairs when the accident was reported. If the client had the work done by Trapp, Johnson would receive a cut. That would account

for the expensive sports car and the extra money he seemed to have.

It could have been a sweet little racket, profitable to both Trapp and Johnson. Why, then, would Trapp kill Johnson?

Guthrie crossed the street, turned the corner and slid into his car, eyes thoughtful, fingers drumming a soft tattoo on the wheel.

Could Johnson have worked the racket without Mrs. Bristol knowing? Would she really be so naive as to accept the story that he had inherited the money? Just how good a businesswoman was she?

Chaney should have some of the answers.

He drove toward the courthouse building through the late afternoon traffic, knowing that he just might be tightening the noose around Trapp's neck and knowing there was nothing he could do about it.

Chaney was still behind his desk, still sifting through the papers, much the same as Guthrie had left him.

Guthrie indicated the papers. "You like that sort of thing?"

Chaney sighed. "No, but it goes with the job. I could assign it to someone else, but this way I'm sure that nothing gets overlooked."

"What are you looking for?"

"A pattern. An answer. During the past month we've been hit with a rash of car thefts, almost as if a high-powered professional outfit moved in on us. How about you? Get anything that would spring Trapp loose and make me look bad?"

"Far from it. You look better than you did this morning." He told him about Johnson and the possibility he had worked with Trapp.

Chaney set his papers aside, straightening them into a neat pile. "It sounds good. I never considered anything like that. Should be easy to check, too. All we have to do is examine the records in the Bristol office to see if Trapp was getting more than his share of the work. It gives us the one thing that was missing—a possible motive." A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Not doing your client any good, are you?"

Guthrie shrugged. "There are no guarantees in this business. You follow where the trail leads, and I was a cop too long to hold back something I think you should know."

"Your help is appreciated, but Mrs. Trapp will be very disappointed."

Guthrie thought of the thin young woman. "More than you

know. The only thing I can do for her now is to see that she doesn't get a bill." He told Chaney about Mrs. Trapp's problem. "Maybe you can help."

"I sure can—"

He was interrupted by the sudden pounding of footsteps in the hall. The door burst open and a patrolman thrust his head inside. "He's gone!"

Chaney was on his feet. "Who's gone?"

"Trapp. He surprised Devlin when he brought his dinner, took his gun and got out by slugging the man on the door to the cell block."

Chaney disappeared with the officer.

Guthrie slowly removed his damp raincoat and slumped into a chair, his feet stretched out before him, his leg aching.

Trapp had escaped, but where could he go? The police would block off the roads leading from town, pinning him inside, and the town wasn't big enough to hide him for long. Yet Trapp must have had something in mind.

"*I'll handle it. I'll handle the whole thing.*" he had said that morning.

What was he going to handle?

Guthrie closed his eyes as the soporific warmth in the room penetrated. He felt sorry for Mrs.

Trapp. She would have to go on alone, have her baby alone, accepting charity whether she wanted it or not simply so that she could go on existing. It would be a far cry from the dreams she must have had when she married Trapp.

The thought nagged him: where would Trapp go?

He left the chair, shaking sleep like a dog shedding water, and began to pace the office. Chaney had left his stolen-car file on the edge of the desk. Guthrie idly turned a few pages. Most of the cars were new, most stolen within the last month. He turned a few more pages. The pattern didn't change.

At the bottom of the sheet was a box to be checked if the car was insured, and alongside it, the name of the insurance company. A good many of the cars were insured by the same firm.

Guthrie replaced the file and rubbed the back of his neck as if the massage would rearrange his tumbling thoughts, and then he moved swiftly, revitalized by a sudden idea, throwing on his coat as he left the office and walking swiftly down the hall out into the early evening darkness to his car.

Day-end traffic delayed him, making him impatient, and he cut from lane to lane. It took him al-

most fifteen minutes before he pulled up in front of the colorful pennants that marked the used-car lot alongside Trapp's garage and headed for the small, white shack at the rear.

Nichols looked up as he came in. "Back for more questions?"

"Trapp doesn't need me now," said Guthrie. "He escaped about a half hour ago."

Nichols' eyes shifted around the room before coming back to Guthrie. "Why did he do a crazy thing like that?"

"I thought you could help me there. I think Trapp is after someone."

The fat lips pursed. "Who?"

"You."

"Why me? Vernon and I were always friends."

"I think you were more than that. I think you were partners."

"Partners in what?"

"Car theft."

Nichols shifted in his chair. "I'm a legitimate businessman."

"Maybe. I think Trapp stole the cars and funneled them through your lot. You arranged to get them out of the state."

Nichols came out of the chair fast. "You can't prove that!"

"I don't have to. Johnson was the inside man. When people took out insurance on their cars or reported that they had bought a

new one, the papers crossed Johnson's desk. All he had to do was pass this information to Trapp. It gave Trapp a lock on any make or model he wanted. He didn't have to waste time looking. All nice late models that would be easy enough to rip off at his convenience because he knew where to locate them. You took over from there."

Nichols sat on the desk and smiled a fat smile. "Suppose you're right. What can you do about it?"

"I can't do anything, but Trapp can. Somewhere along the line, Trapp was double-crossed so he went to that real estate office and killed Johnson. For all we know he was on his way here to get you when they picked him up. He still intends to get you. You know Trapp. No one gives him the shaft without paying for it."

There was a sheen of perspiration on Nichols' face. "Not me."

"You!" snapped Guthrie. "You had to be part of it."

"I had nothing to do with what happened to Vernon. I played it straight. Maybe I sold the cars, but I turned the money in."

"To Johnson? He was a small wheel."

Nichols nodded. "Yeah, he was a small wheel, all right. She was

the boss of this damn operation.”

That jolted Guthrie. “She?”

“Mrs. Bristol. If Trapp is after anyone, it is her.”

Guthrie let the words sink in, absorbing them slowly, trying to relate what Nichols told him to what he already knew. He had been a fool not to realize that there would be little going on in that small office that Mrs. Bristol would not have known. He had been a fool not to realize that if Trapp insisted it was a bum rap, only one other person could have been guilty of shooting Johnson because only one other person had been there.

Yet all Trapp had to do was talk. Or did he?

It would be his word against hers, the word of an ex-con against that of a respectable businesswoman. Then there was Trapp himself, the kind of man who would want to handle a double cross his own way.

“Let’s go,” he said to Nichols.

Nichols licked his fat lips. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Guthrie took a handful of checkered sport coat and pulled roughly, spinning Nichols toward the door. “You want to be alone here if Trapp comes? Besides, I need you.”

Cross-town traffic was light, allowing them to make it in ten

minutes to Mrs. Bristol’s town house. Guthrie glanced at his watch. It had been almost an hour since Trapp had escaped, plenty of time for him to have made it on foot to the brownstone from the courthouse.

A tall, thin, familiar female figure was pacing the sidewalk. Guthrie cursed softly. “Get out,” he told Nichols.

Mrs. Trapp came up to him as he left the car.

“What are you doing here?” Guthrie asked.

Her face was childlike and wan in the light of the street lamp. She handed Guthrie a piece of paper. Guthrie held it so that the street light reflected from its dull surface. It was a newspaper clipping, a story he couldn’t read and a picture he could recognize. It was Mrs. Bristol.

“Exactly what is this?”

“I found it in the apartment under a desk blotter. I thought . . .” She hesitated. “I wondered why Vernon would have it. It’s dated several months ago, about the time he changed. I think she’s the woman.”

“I think so, too,” Guthrie said gently, “but you can do nothing about it. Why don’t you go home?”

“I want to see her.”

Guthrie cursed under his breath

at her stubbornness. She had come to see the woman who had taken her husband, not because she thought she could accomplish anything, but simply because she wanted to see her in the flesh, to examine, to compare, to see why she had lost.

"Your husband escaped," he said. "I think he's on his way here. It could be dangerous."

"Vernon won't hurt me."

"Vernon will hurt anyone who gets in his way," Guthrie said dryly. "You'll be safer at home."

"You're here to protect her?"

"Until I can call the police."

"Let me go in with you. I don't have the nerve to go alone."

The fine rain had formed a halo of droplets on her short dark hair and the shoulders of her raincoat were stained. Guthrie didn't know much about pregnant women, but he was sure that walking around in the rain wasn't on an obstetrician's list of recommended behavior.

"All right," he said. He motioned to Nichols, who had been standing to one side looking as if he were trying to get up enough courage to run.

The three of them mounted the steps. Guthrie rang the bell.

Mrs. Bristol opened the door. Her eyes widened briefly when she recognized Nichols and grew

cold when they shifted to Guthrie. "What do you want now?"

"I have some news for you. Vernon Trapp has escaped."

"That means nothing to me."

"It should. I'd bet he's on his way here. He has a gun and I'd also bet he intends to use it on you."

Her chin lifted as if Guthrie had said something distasteful. "I hardly think that is likely."

Guthrie's patience ran out. He pushed the door wide. "I don't have time to argue with you. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Trapp wouldn't talk, but Nichols did. I intend to call the police and stay with you until they get here." He locked the door behind them and ushered them all into the sitting room. "I want to know one thing. Can Trapp get into this house?"

Color was high on her cheeks. "I don't intend to stand for such high-handed treatment."

"What are you going to do? Call the police? I've already told you I intend to do that. *Can Trapp get into this house?*"

She looked from one to the other, her defenses still up, her face impassive and cameo-like in the soft light of the room.

A small sound from the hallway made Guthrie turn.

Trapp stood in the doorway.

The gun was big and black in his hand, his gray prison uniform clinging to him wetly. "She should have told you I always use the back door. She wouldn't let me use the front. She said it was to keep the neighbors from talking, but it was because she didn't think I was good enough." He grinned, showing his teeth without humor.

Mrs. Trapp said, "Vernon," and took a step forward.

Trapp snapped into a half-crouch. "Dumb broad. You have no business here. Just stay out of this."

Mrs. Trapp's hands twisted. "I understand, Vernon. She is really beautiful. I don't blame you."

Guthrie pulled her back gently. "You can't talk to him now."

"She can't talk to me ever," snapped Trapp.

"I've put it all together," Guthrie said. "The only thing I don't know is what happened in the office that day."

"I'll tell you," Trapp said. "I'll tell you so there's no mistake later about why I killed her. Johnson and I had a nice little racket going until she found out. She called me in. I thought she would black-list me, but she had bigger ideas. She worked out this car-theft thing and wanted me to handle it. I went along. No need to tell you

how she persuaded me to do it. Then she got a little panicky because of a couple of newspaper stories about the police cracking down. I offered to cool it for a while but she wouldn't buy that. We had an argument."

Trapp's gun indicated Nichols. "That day he told me she wanted to see me in a hurry, so I went to the office, something I never did because she always made damn sure we were never seen together. She and Johnson were there. She said she had decided to close the whole thing out, me included, that maybe it was getting a little too hot, but she wanted a clean break and no loose ends. Before I could stop her, she pulled a gun and shot him. She looked like she was ready to shoot me, so I got the hell out of there fast. They picked me up and told me they were holding me for a holdup and murder. I didn't know what they were talking about until I figured it out. There was no use saying anything. She would have doctored the records and set me up good. She's smart enough to do that. I knew she had me cold and I'd have to handle it myself."

"You're a fool," Guthrie said. "You should have told me this morning. That's why your wife hired me. But it's not too late. The only thing they can hold you

on is car theft. We can make a deal about the cop you slugged in breaking out. Give me the gun."

"No way," Trapp said. "No one sets me up like that and gets away with it. She goes. I owe that to her." The gun swung toward Nichols. "Him, too. He had to be in on it."

Nichols was holding his hands chest high, his face white and wet. Mrs. Bristol was beside him, still contemptuous, as if she didn't believe that Trapp had the nerve.

Guthrie knew better. Trapp seemed to set himself, eyes narrow, the gun rigidly before him. Guthrie tensed, ready to dive at Trapp because he couldn't think of anything else. There was no way to get at the gun in his belt that Conway insisted he always carry.

Mrs. Trapp, standing to one side, began to move, placing one foot before the other hesitantly. "Vernon," she said, "don't do this."

"Stay out of this. You know where you stand. I told you a month ago."

She kept moving. "There's something you don't know. Something that will make you very proud."

"I don't want to hear anything from you."

She had a little half-smile on

her face, as if she were talking to a recalcitrant child. "Vernon," she said. She put out a hand.

Guthrie didn't know if she touched the gun or jarred Trapp's arm but the gun went off. Mrs. Trapp did a strange dance backward before her body began to fold at the knees, the hips, the waist.

Guthrie leaped, reaching for the gun with one hand, the other smashing toward Trapp. Trapp staggered, the gun going off again and then Guthrie had it in his hand.

Guthrie knelt by Mrs. Trapp. A stray curl was caught on her cheek and the thin face was calm and peaceful, the lips still holding that half-smile. Guthrie had no doubt she had been dead before she hit the floor.

The dinner in the small restaurant where he and Mrs. Trapp had lunched looked good, but Guthrie had lost most of his appetite.

"Going back tonight?" Chaney asked. "It's rather late."

"No point in racking up a motel bill. You have my statement, and the city isn't so far that I can't drive up here when you need me."

Chaney toyed with his coffee cup. "Mrs. Trapp was right, after

all. Her husband wasn't guilty."

"Of the robbery and murder, no. Of stupidity and stubbornness, yes. There was no need for any of this to happen if he'd only had enough sense to tell somebody what it was all about."

"He wasn't too far wrong. There was no reason for us to buy his story. It would have been very difficult to hang the car thefts and Johnson's killing on Mrs. Bristol. It still won't be easy. There is very little hard evidence. All we have is Trapp's testimony."

"Along with Nichols."

"You saw him. He's saying absolutely nothing."

Guthrie leaned back in the booth. "With good defense attorneys, they'll all probably walk away. The best you can get Trapp for is second degree murder. Since she was his wife, they'll take pity on him." He rose and reached for the check.

Chaney beat him to it. "This is mine. I owe you something for stirring the pot the way you did. If you hadn't, Bristol might have

got away with killing Johnson. I wouldn't have liked to make a mistake like that. Besides, you collect no fee for this one."

"That's Conway's problem, not mine. I get paid every week."

Outside, the rain had stopped. Chaney joined him and they walked to Guthrie's car. "Come up this summer and we'll go fishing," Chaney said.

"I'll do that," Guthrie promised. "You wouldn't want to work for Conway after you retire, would you?"

"I think not," said Chaney. "You can take this job only for so long. There are too many things that stay with you."

Guthrie remembered the way the rain had clung to Mrs. Trapp's short hair, the way the street light had given her a luminescent halo. He felt a dark sadness for the thin young woman who had never stopped loving her husband and who had died for no reason.

"Yeah, there are too many things that stay with you," Guthrie said slowly.



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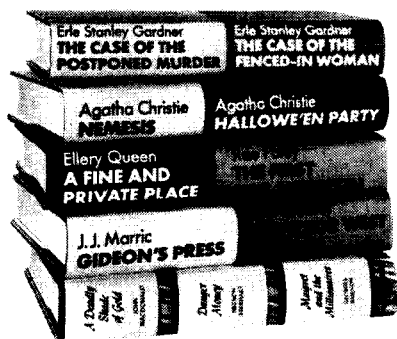
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